

***‘Frères et Enfants du même Père’*: French-Indigenous Alliance and Diplomacy in the *Petit Nord* and Northern Great Plains, 1731-1743**

By Scott Berthelette

**A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of the
University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of**

MASTER OF ARTS

**Department of History
Joint Master’s Program
University of Manitoba/ University of Winnipeg
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada**

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Abstract

The eighteenth century French explorer La Vérendrye has been commemorated in Canadian history as the “Pathfinder of the West.” Although many historians have praised La Vérendrye for his tolerance and understanding of Aboriginal culture, he was nevertheless a colonial servant, fiercely loyal to the French Crown, and tasked to carry out the imperial policies of Versailles. La Vérendrye sought to create alliances with the Indigenous peoples of the *Petit Nord* – Cree, Monsoni, Assiniboine, and Dakota – with the intent to bring them into a network of French-mediated alliances emanating from the Great Lakes region. The governor of New France, called Onontio by the natives, sought to ensure the symbolic subjugation of all the Indigenous nations of the Great Lakes region and the *Petit Nord*.

In theory, the role and acknowledgement of Onontio as the Father of the Alliance would have permitted the Cree, Assiniboine, and Dakota of the *Petit Nord* to recognize each other as “brothers and children of the same father [*frères et Enfants du même Père*],” to forget their inter-village quarrels, and to forge a common identity. In reality, this was far from the case, as frequent inter-village rivalries placed French officers at the western posts in a difficult position. Unlike their Great Lakes counterparts, the Cree of the *Petit Nord* did not need the “glue” of French mediation to hold together their already cohesive alliance with the Assiniboine, nor did they need Onontio’s authority to protect them from their traditional enemies, the Dakota. Ultimately, the Cree, Assiniboine, and Dakota rejected Onontio as their Father, dismissed La Vérendrye as his representative, and ultimately refused French conceptions of the alliance in the *Petit Nord* and Northern Great Plains.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor Professor Robin Jarvis Brownlie for her guidance and support throughout my research and writing of my thesis. The many meetings in her office and her many thoughtful questions helped to shape my research and thesis. I would also like to thank Professor Mark Meuwese and Professor Alexander Freund at the University of Winnipeg for their good advice, support, and many letters of recommendation throughout my Master's program. Thank you, as well, to my family, friends, and to my partner Kathryn for all their continued patience and support throughout the writing process.

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
INTRODUCTION	2
CHAPTER ONE: The “<i>Pax Gallica</i>”: French Mediation in the <i>Petit Nord</i>	12
CHAPTER TWO: The Native Ground: Indigenous Autonomy in the <i>Petit Nord</i>	34
CHAPTER THREE: The <i>Petit Nord</i> “Shatter Zone”: Disease Epidemics and the Commercialization of Slavery	54
CHAPTER FOUR: “Disobedient Children” in the <i>Petit Nord</i> and Northern Great Plains, 1742-1754	74
CONCLUSION	88
BIBILIOGRAPHY.....	94

Introduction

Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, Sieur de La Vérendrye has been fondly remembered in Canadian memory as the “Pathfinder of the West,” who learned and respected “the customs of the Aborigines... [and] entertained good relations with the First Nations by respecting their way of life.”¹ La Vérendrye’s life has been celebrated as that of the archetypal *voyageur*. Denis Combet’s recent popular history book *In Search of the Western Sea* asserts that La Vérendrye’s explorations spawned an “encounter between the two worlds [that] seems to be a positive one.”² Although many historians have praised La Vérendrye for his tolerance and understanding of Aboriginal culture, he was nevertheless a colonial servant, fiercely loyal to the French Crown, and tasked to carry out the imperial policies of Versailles.

La Vérendrye, his sons, and his crew of fifty *voyageurs* sought to create a “middle ground” with the Indigenous peoples of the *Petit Nord* and the Northern Great Plains – Cree, Monsoni, Assiniboine, and Dakota – with the intent to bring them into a network of French-Indigenous alliances emanating from the Great Lakes region, known by French as the *pays d’en haut*. Historian Richard White first used the term “middle ground” to describe the shared meanings, compromises, and “creative misunderstandings” inherent in the French-Algonquian alliance in the *pays d’en haut*.³ Despite French fantasies to reduce their Aboriginal allies to mere subjects of empire, they lacked the military force to sufficiently overawe, or subdue, the Indigenous peoples of the *pays d’en haut*. White has argued that “the French continued to yearn for a simpler world of force and dictation, a world where the French commanded and Indians

¹ Denis Combet, *In Search of the Western Sea: Selected Journals of La Vérendrye* (Winnipeg: Great Plains Publications, 2001), 165.

² Ibid.

³ Richard White, “Creative Misunderstandings and New Understandings,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 63 (2006), 10.

obeyed.”⁴ In order to maintain their colony against their English imperial rivals and the powerful Haudenosaunee, the French diligently courted the Indigenous nations of the *pays d’en haut* and bestowed upon them lavish gifts to win them over as allies and as metaphorical kinsmen. Canadian historian W. J. Eccles has remarked that it was “almost incredible that with a mere handful of men the French were able to lay claim to most of the continent for over half a century.”⁵

Starting in the 1730s, La Vérendrye and other French imperial agents began to expand the alliance towards the territories Northwest of Lake Superior, known as the “*Petit Nord*.” Historical geographer Paul Hackett has noted that the term *Petit Nord* was an informal regional designation employed first by the French fur traders “to describe the large and valuable fur-trading country north of Lake Superior and east of Lake Winnipeg.”⁶ These French imperial agents were, in effect, “graduates of the school of the middle ground,” and they carried away from the *pays d’en haut* into the *Petit Nord* the diplomatic language of the middle ground and its structures of cross-cultural understanding.⁷ The situation in the *Petit Nord*, however, was markedly different from the specific historical conditions that had shaped the French to the French-Algonquian alliance in the *pays d’en haut*. In the La Vérendrye historiography, the explorer’s search for the Western Sea has often obscured his roles in diplomacy and alliance-making in the *Petit Nord*. Nevertheless, the search for the Western Sea was of the utmost importance for French imperial ambitions, as such a “discovery” would have given the French a decisive economic advantage in the worldwide imperial struggle. Alan MacDonell has argued

⁴ Richard White, *The Middle Ground* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 173.

⁵ W.J. Eccles, “La Mer de l’Ouest: Outpost of Empire,” in *Essays on New France*, ed. W.J. Eccles (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987), 98.

⁶ Paul Hackett, *A Very Remarkable Sickness: Epidemics in the Petit Nord, 1670 to 1846* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2002), 15.

⁷ White, *Creative Misunderstandings and New Understandings*, 10.

that La Vérendrye was a “colonial servant” whose own “loyalty to Quebec and Paris was unswerving.”⁸ La Vérendrye personally sought to attain *la gloire* – recognition, renown, and wealth for himself and his sons. As Alan MacDonell argues, La Vérendrye was hardly the “independent Canadian entrepreneur” that many historians have anachronistically portrayed. Rather, La Vérendrye was intrinsically tied to the interests of the French Crown. La Vérendrye’s encounter with the Indigenous nations of the *Petit Nord* saw the collision of French imperial policy with the village politics and kinship obligations of the Cree, Assiniboine, Monsoni, and Dakota First Nations. I propose to map the relations between Indigenous peoples and the French officers and *voyageurs* at the western posts in the *Petit Nord* and the Northern Great Plains in the eighteenth century. Ultimately, I will argue that La Vérendrye was unable to fulfill his role in the emerging French-Indigenous alliance of the *Petit Nord*. As a result, the power of French mediation diminished and La Vérendrye was unable to dictate the terms of the already tenuous alliance.

La Vérendrye never attained *la gloire* of being the first Frenchman to reach the Western Sea. The slow pace of his explorations led many of his contemporaries to accuse him of avarice and corruption. These jealous contemporaries presumed that La Vérendrye had used the pretext of exploration to acquire a monopoly on the lucrative fur markets of the *Petit Nord*.⁹ Nor was La Vérendrye’s reputation rehabilitated after his death in 1749, French historian Daniel Royot has noted how “La Vérendrye was not recognized as a major discoverer by early historians, who judged him uneducated, erratic, and venal.”¹⁰ In 1852, Pierre Margry, a French archivist, discovered a large quantity of La Vérendrye’s journals, reports, and letters. He wrote a

⁸ Alan MacDonell, “Radisson and La Vérendrye: Two Frontiersmen, Two Frontiers,” *Western Humanities Review*, 2 (2006), 51.

⁹ Daniel Royot, *Divided Loyalties in a Doomed Empire: The French in the West from New France to the Lewis and Clark Expedition* (Cranbury: Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corp, 2007), 229.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

revisionist history wherein La Vérendrye was now depicted as constantly misunderstood by the French government, a victim of the accusations of his detractors, and as a valiant and dutiful explorer who put the good of the colony ahead of himself and his family.¹¹ This *new* interpretation of La Vérendrye continued into the twentieth century and he eventually blossomed into one of the major figures in the history of New France.¹²

The rediscovery of the *Journals and Letters* by Pierre Margry, and the subsequent translation and transcription by Lawrence J. Burpee in 1927, led to the flurry of publications on La Vérendrye throughout the early twentieth century. Notably, Burpee praised La Vérendrye as “Canada’s bravest son,” who “gave all that he had, including his life, for the glory and welfare of his country.” Burpee concludes, “we owe to him and his gallant sons the discovery of a large part of what is to-day Western Canada.”¹³ Agnes Laut asserted that “every mile westward” of La Vérendrye’s travels “was consecrated by heroism.”¹⁴ Nellis Crouse has categorized La Vérendrye’s journeys in the West as the “story of a brave, adventurous people who found at their feet a vast, unknown continent of lofty mountains, endless prairies, mighty inland seas, great rivers, and impenetrable forests, a continent of undeveloped riches, inhabited by strange savages whose ways of life were different from their own.”¹⁵ Similarly, Duane R. Lund has described La Vérendrye as the “last of the great French explorers... [he] was a true giant of the North.”¹⁶ Martin Kavanagh has argued that La Vérendrye was “somewhat ahead of his contemporaries,” and that, in his progressiveness “wished to push the borders of his country westwards and open up a vast territory to humanity, to religion and progress.”¹⁷ In the 1970s, even the pre-eminent

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Burpee, *Pathfinders of the Great Plains*, 1.

¹⁴ Agnes Laut, *Pathfinders of the West* (Ayer Co Pub, 1904), 197.

¹⁵ Nellis Crouse, *La Verendrye Fur Trader and Explorer* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1956), 1.

¹⁶ Duane R. Lund, *Lake of the Woods: Yesterday and Today* (Staples: Nordell Graphic Communications, 1975), 23.

¹⁷ Martin Kavanagh, *La Vérendrye His Life and Times* (Norwich: Fletcher & Son Ltd, 1967), 4.

historian on *le Poste de l'Ouest*, Antoine Champagne, asserted that La Vérendrye had departed on a “noble adventure of discovery.”¹⁸

From these early historians, only W. J. Eccles had notably taken a more analytical and critical approach to La Vérendrye, noting that he “appears to have been neither a good disciplinarian nor a competent administrator. He was a manifestly poor businessman and his finances were always in disarray.”¹⁹ Eccles has criticised Antoine Champagne’s *Les La Vérendrye et le Poste de l'Ouest* by pointing out Champagne’s “partisanship and his failure to appreciate the actual role of the western Indian nations... It is claimed [by Champagne] that he gave an empire to France, but this ignores the fact that to the end of the regime the French had only a handful of men at a few scattered trading posts.”²⁰ Regrettably, beyond the one essay and a few scant mentions in his various books, Eccles never produced any major study on La Vérendrye or the western posts in the *Petit Nord*.

Recently, a few works have been published seeking to re-evaluate the heroic La Vérendrye discourse. In a short article, Karlee Sapoznik has argued that the La Vérendrye historiography must now turn its focus from his travel itinerary to an analysis where the categories of gender and race intersect.²¹ Similarly, Alan MacDonell has argued that “colonial politics and his own delusions” should be taken as significant factors in a revisionist analysis of La Vérendrye’s *Journals and Letters*.²² Therefore, it is now a suitable period for revisionist

¹⁸ Antoine Champagne, *Nouvelles Études sur Les La Vérendrye et le Poste de l'Ouest* (Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1971), 5.

¹⁹ Eccles, *La Mer de l'Ouest: Outpost of Empire*, 101.

²⁰ W. J. Eccles, “Review of *Les La Vérendrye et le Poste de l'Ouest* by Antoine Champagne,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 27 (1970), 171.

²¹ Karlee Sapoznik, “Where the Historiography Falls Short: La Vérendrye through the Lens of Gender, Race and Slavery in Early French Canada, 1731-1749,” *Manitoba History*, 4 (2009), 22.

²² Alan MacDonell, “Radisson and La Vérendrye: Two Frontiersmen, Two Frontiers,” *Western Humanities Review*, 2 (2006), 52.

histories with a more analytical approach towards La Vérendrye's *Journals and Letters*, which have hitherto been steeped in romanticism and the heroic discourse.²³

La Vérendrye, and other French imperial agents, carefully followed a diplomatic language and set of protocols, which had been first developed by the French-Algonquian alliance in the *pays d'en haut*. The French and Algonquian-speaking natives created the middle ground to arrive at common conceptions of understanding and suitable ways of behaving within the alliance system.²⁴ Near the French outposts, European and Indigenous traders interacted at a more informal level. In both cases, "the boundaries of the Algonquian and French worlds melted at the edges and merged."²⁵ The middle ground was a realm wherein both the French and Algonquians sought to understand and be understood by the cultural other. White notes that "the central and defining aspect of the middle ground was the willingness of those who created it to justify their own actions in terms of what they perceived to be their partner's cultural premises."²⁶

The French-Algonquian alliance "grafted together imperial politics and the village politics of kinship; the two became branches of a single tree."²⁷ The French alliance system bound together distant Indigenous peoples through "their real or metaphorical kinship relations with one another as by their common standing as children of Onontio, who was the

²³ For even more examples of 'heroic' La Vérendrye biographies and publications, see Irene Moore, *Valiant La Vérendrye* (Quebec: L.S.A, Proulx, 1927); Louis Arthur Prud'Homme, "Pierre Gaultier de Varennes Sieur De La Vérendrye," *Bulletin of the Historical Society of St. Boniface* 5 (1916), 1-48; T. J. Campbell, "Out of the Grave: The Discovery of Fort St. Charles in 1908," *Bulletin of the Historical Society of St. Boniface* 5 (1915), 1-22; S.J. Paquin, "The Discovery of the Relics of the Reverend Jean Pierre Aulneau," *La Société Historique de Saint-Boniface* 1 (1911), 58-75.

²⁴ Richard White refers to the French allies of the *pays d'en haut* collectively as "Algonquians." "I have, with some reluctance, referred to the people living within the *pays d'en haut* as the Algonquians... *Algonquian* refers to a language group... I have, however, taken the term as a collective name for the inhabitants of the *pays d'en haut* because Algonquian speakers were the dominant group, and because with the onslaught of the Iroquois, the Algonquians forged a collective sense of themselves as people distinct from, and opposed to, the Five Nations, or Iroquois proper." White, *The Middle Ground*, xi.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 50.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 52.

²⁷ White, *The Middle Ground*, 40.

representative of the French king.”²⁸ The title of Onontio had been bestowed upon the Governor-General by the Algonquians. Onontio was the embodiment of this alliance, and from the centre of Onontio’s cabin, the French spread their influence to win over Indigenous nations as allies, rather than as subjects of empire.²⁹ The western posts established by La Vérendrye were the absolute peripherals of New France, the last outposts of empire in North America. As Eccles has argued, “French sovereignty in the West existed only within French posts, beyond no farther than the range of French muskets... the French were not sovereign in the West; the Indian nations were.”³⁰ From these outposts of empire, La Vérendrye would seek out Indigenous nations as allies, trading partners, and guides.

From the western posts, La Vérendrye wrote to the colonial government that the Cree had assured him that they wanted to submit themselves entirely to the French, “to become obedient to you [Onontio], and that they will obey you in all things.”³¹ Furthermore, La Vérendrye wrote that the allied nation of the Cree, the Assiniboine, also wished, and even begged, to be admitted into “the number of your children, and to maintain the fort in perpetuity in order that they may be able to obtain what they need there, and that their families may be in safety.”³² These initial reports would have pleased the Governor-General Charles de la Boische, the Marquis de Beauharnois, who wanted to extend the French-mediated alliance beyond the *pays d’en haut*. The imperial agent La Vérendrye was eager to fulfill the wishes of Quebec and Versailles by incorporating the Cree and Assiniboine as children of Onontio, and into the alliance of the *pays d’en haut*.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Eccles, *Le Mer de l’Ouest*, 98-99.

³¹ Lawrence J. Burpee, trans., *Journals and Letters of Pierre Gaultier De Varennes De La Vérendrye and his Sons* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1927), 100.

³² Ibid, 101.

The conditions of the *Petit Nord*, however, were markedly different from the *pays d'en haut*.³³ Although La Vérendrye, as well as other French imperial agents, carried with them the rhetoric and the protocols of the middle ground outside of the *pays d'en haut*, the French were unable to replicate the infrastructure and conditions of the middle ground that existed within the Great Lakes region. In *pays d'en haut* there had existed the conditions necessary for the construction of such a historical space – “a rough balance of power, mutual need or a desire for what the other possesses, and an inability by either side to commandeer enough force to compel the other to change.”³⁴ Outside of the *pays d'en haut*, White argues, “there were none of the common meanings of the alliance and none of its history of success against common enemies such as the Iroquois and the English.”³⁵ Ultimately, the infrastructure – mission villages, trading posts, forts – and the common meanings of alliance did not exist outside of the *pays d'en haut*.

The middle ground depended on an inability of both participants to gain their ends through force.³⁶ Although this had been the case in the *pays d'en haut*, beyond Lake Superior the rough balance of power between the Great Lakes Algonquian-speaking natives, the Wendat, and the Haudenosaunee did not exist, and the role of French mediation was irrelevant. Rather, the Cree and Assiniboine alliance was in a much stronger position to mediate disputes between the French and their English colonial rivals on Hudson Bay, which they frequently did. Although La Vérendrye perceived his interactions with the Cree and Assiniboine through the lenses of the

³³ Mapping the spatial boundaries of the *pays d'en haut* has been a particularly important question in my research, and for the implementation of Richard White’s “middle ground” framework on La Vérendrye’s interactions with the Cree and Assiniboine. According to C.J. Balesi’s map of New France, the boundaries of the *pays d'en haut* extend to the northwest as far as the Lake of the Woods. Therefore, La Vérendrye would have initially operated on the peripheries of the *pays d'en haut*, but would have later established himself beyond its boundaries. In all cases, I will argue that La Vérendrye’s interactions with the Cree, on the peripheries and beyond the *pays d'en haut*, were markedly different than the French interactions had been with other Algonquian-speaking natives had been in the Great Lakes Basin because the rough balance of power did not exist in the Northwest. C.J. Balesi, *The Time of the French in the Heart of the Continent, 1673-1818* (Chicago: Alliance Française, 1996), xii.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid, 12.

³⁶ White, *The Middle Ground*, 52.

middle ground, the Indigenous nations of the *Petit Nord* did not perceive themselves as the obedient, or even semi-obedient, children of Onontio. The Cree and Assiniboine did, however, attempt to incorporate the French into their world and did perceive La Vérendrye and his sons as their friends, allies, and even kinsmen. Between the French and the Indigenous inhabitants of the *Petit Nord*, there emerged a kinship alliance, whose parameters were mostly dictated by the Cree and Assiniboine participants.

Knowledge of La Vérendrye's explorations and western posts are derived from the journals, reports, and letters exchanged between La Vérendrye, the Governor-General Beauharnois, and the Minister of the Marine and Colonies Jean-Frédéric Phélypeaux, the Count of Maurepas. Fortunately, Indigenous voices are not entirely lost from these documents, as historian Keith Widder has argued that colonial records "contain many words spoken by Native people articulating their feelings, demands, fears, motivations, and understanding of events."³⁷ In addition, I have also considered Kathryn Magee Labelle's approach to analysing and writing Indigenous histories, through the usage of colonial records. In her recent book on the dispersal and survival of the Wendat people, *Dispersed But Not Destroyed*, Labelle notes how she "gives considerable weight to the personal biographies of Wendat individuals as a means to offset the widespread 'faceless' history of Native North America."³⁸

Therefore, throughout my analysis of the La Vérendrye *Journals and Letters*, I will examine not only Indigenous words, motivations, and understandings, but also Indigenous peoples as individuals, acting in their own autonomous interests. I will also seek to implement theories and conceptual frameworks to enrich my analysis of the Indigenous peoples of the *Petit*

³⁷ Keith R. Widder, *Beyond Pontiac's Shadow: Michilimackinac and the Anglo-Indian War of 1763* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), xxv.

³⁸ Kathryn Magee Labelle, *Dispersed But Not Destroyed: A History of the Seventeenth-Century Wendat People* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013), 10.

Nord and their interactions with the French newcomers. In the first chapter, I demonstrate how these “graduates of the school of the middle ground” attempted to use French mediation as an instrument of power in the *Petit Nord*.³⁹ La Vérendrye sought to implement a *Pax Gallica* to mediate and enforce a peace between the various Indigenous peoples of the *Petit Nord* and Northern Great Plains. In the second chapter, historian Kathleen DuVal’s conceptual framework of the “native ground” allows me frame the Indigenous perspective in the *Petit Nord* and perhaps reveals a truer reality of French-Indian relations, than that espoused in the *Journals and Letters*.⁴⁰ In the third chapter, historian Robbie Ethridge’s theory of the “shatter zone” reveals the effects of French incorporation into native societies – the commercialization of slavery, and though not the introduction, at least the amplification of epidemic diseases.⁴¹ Finally, in the last chapter, I explore how the Indigenous peoples of the *Petit Nord*, the Northern Great Plains, and Hudson Bay Lowlands abandoned and rejected their French Father, Onontio, in favour of other more lucrative economic opportunities. Using these conceptual frameworks and theories, I seek to restore an understanding of the autonomy exercised by the Cree, Assiniboine, and Dakota in the *Petit Nord* and Northern Great Plains by going beyond the simple stories of exploration, conquest, and settlement.

³⁹ White, *Creative Misunderstandings and New Understandings*, 10.

⁴⁰ Kathleen DuVal, *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

⁴¹ Robbie Ethridge, “Introduction: Mapping the Mississippian Shatter Zone,” in *Mapping the Mississippian Shatter Zone: The Colonial Indian Slave Trade and Regional Instability in the American South*, ed. Robbie Ethridge and Sheri M. Shuck-Hall (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 2009).

Chapter I

The “*Pax Gallica*”: French Mediation in the *Petit Nord*

The French-Algonquian alliance was successful in the Great Lakes region because the French had used the devastation of the Beaver Wars as justification to unite the various Algonquian-speaking nations as “children” of the French Governor-General.⁴² In the mid-seventeenth century, disease epidemics, famine, and unprecedented levels of Haudenosaunee military aggression had forced the Wendat, and many other Indigenous peoples, to relocate westward as refugees.⁴³ The French followed this westward migration and established themselves amongst these aggregated villages of ethnically diverse nations populating the Great Lakes. In the late seventeenth century, the French pursued a policy to unite the nations of this shatter zone into a French-mediated alliance. The French and their Aboriginal allies used military strength to force the Haudenosaunee into the Great Peace of Montreal of 1701.⁴⁴ The Great Peace of Montreal cemented the patriarchal alliance of mediation in the *pays d'en haut*, and extended a “*Pax Gallica*” to an immense geographic area of North America.⁴⁵ The Great Peace of 1701 cemented an alliance of over forty Indigenous nations and recognized the Governor-General as the “Father,” or Onontio.⁴⁶ Although the Algonquians had mandated that the alliance should be “largely Algonquian in form and spirit,” they still needed the “glue” of Onontio’s authority and French mediation to bind the alliance together.⁴⁷ As White argues, this resulted in

⁴² White, *The Middle Ground*, 1-49.

⁴³ Gilles Havard, *The Great Peace of Montreal of 1701*, trans. Phyllis Aronoff and Howard Scott (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), 40.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 79.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 3-4.

⁴⁶ White, *The Middle Ground*, 145.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 143.

“an odd imperialism where mediation succeeded and force failed, where colonizers gave gifts to the colonized and patriarchal metaphors were the heart of politics.”⁴⁸

The conditions in the *Petit Nord*, however, were markedly different and the French were unable to replicate their patriarchal role of mediation outside of the Great Lakes Region.

Regardless, the experiences and lessons learned from the Beaver Wars and the 1701 Great Peace of Montreal were carried outside of the *pays d'en haut* by La Vérendrye. Although at least one band of Cree from the area Northwest of Lake Superior had been present at the Great Peace of Montreal, they controlled the peripheral zones of the *pays d'en haut* and been largely spared from the violence and destruction during the Beaver Wars.⁴⁹ Early access in the seventeenth century to the Hudson's Bay Company traders also allowed the Cree and Assiniboine to maintain greater autonomy from the French, than had their Algonquian counterparts in the *pays d'en haut*.

In 1731, La Vérendrye, his sons, his nephew, and fifty *engagés* canoed up the Saint Lawrence and through the Great Lakes, arriving at Kaministiquia on the western shore of Lake Superior. Throughout the 1730s, La Vérendrye and his family would establish trading posts northwest of Lake Superior: Fort St. Pierre on Rainy Lake, Fort St. Charles on the Lake of the Woods, Fort Maurepas on Lake Winnipeg, and Fort Rouge and Fort La Reine on the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. Eventually, La Vérendrye and his sons would travel onto the Great Plains, through the Dakotas; his sons even reached as far as the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. La Vérendrye sought to coerce the Cree and Assiniboine to join the French-Algonquian alliance and to become children of Onontio. La Vérendrye employed the cross-cultural understanding of the middle ground in an attempt to connect the Indigenous politics of the village to the French imperial centre. The French in the *Petit Nord*, however, were hardly in a position to fulfill the

⁴⁸ White, *The Middle Ground*, 145.

⁴⁹ Havard, *The Great Peace of Montreal of 1701*, 120.

role of Onontio's representatives. La Vérendrye was unable to be the generous benefactor that the Cree and Assiniboine demanded, as the western posts were logistically too difficult to keep continuously well supplied. Moreover, unlike in the Great Lakes, La Vérendrye's attempts at mediation were unneeded and unwanted.

La Vérendrye attempted to draw the Indigenous nations of the *Petit Nord* and the Northern Great Plains into the middle of "Onontio's cabin." French historian Gilles Havard has argued that Onontio was the centre of the alliance, and from "Onontio's cabin" there emanated a "circle of peace," which extended the *Pax Gallica* across all Indigenous peoples within the alliance system.⁵⁰ In theory, the role and acknowledgement of the Governor-General as the Father of the Alliance, Onontio, would have permitted the Cree, Assiniboine, and Dakota of the *Petit Nord* to recognize each other as "brothers and children of the same father," to forget their inter-village quarrels, and to forge a common identity.⁵¹ In reality, this was often far from the case because of pre-existing patterns of warfare and the principal Indigenous codes of warfare. Frequent inter-village rivalries and quarrels placed French officers at the western posts in a difficult position.⁵² Unlike their Great Lakes counterparts, the Cree of the *Petit Nord* rejected Onontio as their Father; they did not need the "glue" of French mediation to hold together their already cohesive alliance with the Assiniboine, nor did they need Onontio's authority to protect them from their traditional enemies, the Dakota.

Violence and warfare had crystallised the French-Algonquian alliance of the *pays d'en haut*.⁵³ White has described the alliance as a "Janus-faced alliance."⁵⁴ The alliance rested

⁵⁰ Gilles Havard, *Empire et métissages: Indiens et Français dans le Pays d'en Haut, 1660-1715* (Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2003), 219.

⁵¹ Havard, *Empire et métissages*, 217.

⁵² *Ibid*, 212.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 217.

⁵⁴ White, *The Middle Ground*, 142.

theoretically on the central role of Onontio, the French Father, and the emergence of Montreal as a commercial and diplomatic hub.⁵⁵ Facing east towards their imperial rivals, Onontio appeared at the head of a powerful Algonquian force. White notes that “This was the alliance armed and breathing fire in the service of imperial France, the alliance that cowed the Iroquois and repeatedly fought the far more numerous British to a standstill.”⁵⁶ Facing west, Onontio and his officers “carried the calumet, not the hatchet.”⁵⁷ To preserve their powerful position in Canada as the Father and mediator of all the Great Lakes nations, the French sought to extend the alliance and bring even more children into their family.

Addressing the Governor-General as their Father, the Algonquians appear to have ceded autonomy to the patriarchal demands of the French alliance; however, as Havard argues, the Algonquian diplomatic tradition in the *pays d'en haut* produced numerous familial metaphors. These familial metaphors – brother, father, nephew, uncle, grandfather – formulised inter-village diplomatic relations between the Indigenous peoples of the Great Lakes Region.⁵⁸ White has also argued that although “Onontio was a person of real power... none of the French governors who led the alliance was regarded as a conqueror.”⁵⁹ Instead, the Algonquians “demanded a father who mediated more often than he commanded, who forgave more often than he punished, and who gave more than he received.”⁶⁰

When La Vérendrye first established the western posts in the *Petit Nord* in the 1730s, he acted as an imperial agent and presented himself as the mouthpiece of Onontio, the Great Father in Montreal. When a group of Assiniboine delegates first presented themselves to the French and

⁵⁵ Havard, *Empire et métissages*, 215.

⁵⁶ White, *The Middle Ground*, 142.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Havard, *Empire et métissages*, 219.

⁵⁹ White, *The Middle Ground*, 36.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

requested that they establish a trading post in their vicinity, La Vérendrye made a solemn speech welcoming them into the trade alliance and Onontio's family:

I then began by telling them that our Father, the great chief, would be very glad that they had come to see me at fort St. Charles: in his name I received them into the number of his children; I recommended them never to listen to any other word than his, which would be announced to them by me or by someone in my place... the French were numerous, there was no land unknown to them, and there was only one great chief among them, whose mouth piece I was, and whom all the others obeyed. If they obeyed him also as his children, every year he would send Frenchmen to them to bring them such things as they required to satisfy their needs.⁶¹

La Vérendrye declared that he was the “mouth piece” of the Father in Montreal, the representative of Onontio in the *Petit Nord*. In the *pays d'en haut*, the French officer had been a significant figure; Havard has described him as “the living embodiment of the alliance.”⁶² In the *Petit Nord*, however, the French officer failed to negotiate lasting alliances because of the political autonomy of the Cree, Assiniboine, and Dakota. These Indigenous peoples had no need or want of French mediation, or the diplomatic language and customs of the middle ground.

Despite Indigenous autonomy, the French continued to fantasize and yearn for an alliance where the Indians were “reduced to proper obedience, inspired by fear and respect, rather than to a cooperation secured by negotiation and generosity.”⁶³ To accomplish this, Havard has argued, Onontio sought to use “his power and ability to

⁶¹ Pierre Gaultier de La Vérendrye, “Report in Journal form of all that took place at fort St. Charles from May 27, 1733, to July 12 of the following year, 1734, to be transmitted to the Marquis de Beauharnois, Governor-General of New France, by his very humble servant Laverandrie, who has been honoured with his orders for the establishment of several Posts to prepare the way for the discovery of the Western Sea,” in *Journals and Letters*, ed. and trans. Lawrence J. Burpee, 147-148.

⁶² Giles Havard, *Empire et métissages: Indiens et Français dans le Pays d'en Haut, 1660-1715* (Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2003), 234.

⁶³ White, *The Middle Ground*, 173-174.

control information” to “set himself up as arbiter of international relations.”⁶⁴ Indeed, the governor Louis-Hector de Callière had succeeded in becoming the arbiter and mediator of international relations during the 1701 Great Peace of Montreal. These far-flung alliances, however, were only held together by the tireless work of the French officers and imperial agents, the representatives of the colonial government. Havard has described these “mouth pieces” of Onontio as “diplomats in Indian lands, veritable political intermediaries, who gave their hosts many gifts while simultaneously intervening in their domestic affairs.”⁶⁵ By virtue of their positions as mediators and arbiters, the French “claimed the right to interfere in aboriginal affairs and, in the margins of their empire, ‘fabricated’ international law to some extent to ensure the symbolic subjugation of the Indian nations.”⁶⁶

The strategy of *Pax Gallica*, which had emerged from the 1701 Great Peace of Montreal, involved establishing peace amongst all the Indigenous nations of the *pays d’en haut* and beyond. Havard has related the strategy of *Pax Gallica* to Michel Foucault’s expression “silent war,” a way for the French to extend forms of domination over Indigenous peoples. Havard argues that this “peace-war” was built on concepts of arbitration and mediation.⁶⁷ French mediation, an integral component of the middle ground, was not a benign or egalitarian process. Although the French were unable to subjugate the Indians as “subjects,” they were, nevertheless, characterized as subordinate

⁶⁴ Giles Havard, “Protection and Unequal Alliance: The French Conception of Sovereignty over Indians in New France,” in *French and Indians in the Heart of North America, 1630-1815*, ed. Robert Englebort and Guillaume Teasdale. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 124.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

allies who had performed an act of political allegiance, while still retaining their sovereignty.”⁶⁸

Diplomatic assemblies were the staging areas where French imperial agents attempted to arbitrate and mediate disputes between Indigenous nations, in other words, to subordinate Aboriginal allies to the *Pax Gallica*, Onontio’s ongoing “peace-war” in the west.⁶⁹ The French officer, however, did not simply dictate the terms of the alliance. In the diplomatic assemblies, the middle ground between French and Indigenous participants was in a constant process of mutation and invention. Compromises were sought to accommodate both imperial and village politics. In the *Petit Nord* and Northern Great Plains, however, the Cree and Assiniboine chiefs would rebuke Onontio’s imposition of the *Pax Gallica*.

In January 1734, La Vérendrye learned from Marin Urtesbise, one of his merchant associates at Fort St. Pierre on Rainy Lake, that a party of 300 Monsoni warriors were preparing to march against the Dakota and Anishinaabe.⁷⁰ At this point, La Vérendrye had already been in the Boundary Waters region of the *Petit Nord* for more than three years and had established two trading posts, Fort St. Pierre on Rainy Lake and Fort St. Charles on the Lake of the Woods. The Monsoni chief near Fort St. Pierre feared that the 300 warriors would depart on the warpath without French consent, because they were being “strongly urged thereto by some old women who were weeping day and night mourning over the death of their relatives and beseeching them

⁶⁸ Ibid, 118.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ According to G. Hubert Smith, the Monsoni were a smaller group living around Rainy Lake who were closely related to the Cree, “in some now obscure manner.” For whatever reason, La Vérendrye always distinguishes the Monsoni from the other Cree bands. G. Hubert Smith, *The Explorations of the La Vérendryes in the Northern Plains, 1738-43* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 7.

to go to war to avenge them.”⁷¹ La Vérendrye left Fort St. Charles on the Lake of the Woods in haste and arrived at Fort St. Pierre by the end of the month seeking to prevent the war against the Dakota and Anishinaabe, who were allied to the French of the Lake Pepin trading post.

Upon arrival, he gathered an assembly of prominent warriors and war chiefs in the house of Marin Urtesbise. La Vérendrye was confident that he could prevent the outbreak of war. His actions, however, would only further entangle the French in the Cree-Monsoni political system. La Vérendrye began the assembly by openly berating and admonishing the recognized war chief:

By this flag I bind you to myself; by this collar I bar against you the road to the Saulteur and the Sioux [Anishinaabe and Dakota]; and I give you this tobacco in order that your warriors may smoke it and understand my word... Peace is proposed, yet you seek to trouble the land. Do you want to strike the Saulteur and the Sioux? You needn't leave the fort; here are some (pointing to the Frenchmen), eat if you are bold enough, you and your warriors [*Veux tu fapper le Saulteur et le Scioux, tu n'as que faire de sortir du fort, en voicy, en montrant les françois, mange si tu és assez hardy toy et tes guerriers*]... I pity you; I know you love war.⁷²

La Vérendrye attempted to shame the war party into aborting the expedition. Since the French were allied with the Dakota and Anishinaabe, La Vérendrye mockingly invited the Cree and Monsoni to strike at the Frenchmen sitting in Council, since symbolically they were all kinsmen. A Cree chief named La Marteblanche who had accompanied the French from Fort St. Charles supported La Vérendrye's appeal; he argued: “My brothers, do you reflect on what you are about to do? The Saulteur and Sioux are our allies and children of the same Father [Onontio]. How can any man have so bad a heart as to want to kill his own relatives?”⁷³

⁷¹ Pierre Gaultier de La Vérendrye, “Report in Journal form of all that took place at fort St. Charles from May 27, 1733, to July 12 of the following year, 1734, to be transmitted to the Marquis de Beauharnois, Governor-General of New France, by his very humble servant Laveranderie, who has been honoured with his orders for the establishment of several Posts to prepare the way for the discovery of the Western Sea,” in *Journals and Letters*, ed. and trans. Lawrence J. Burpee, 165.

⁷² *Ibid*, 168-169.

⁷³ *Ibid*.

The assembly deliberated on the best course of actions. Finally, the opposing chief rose and told La Vérendrye, “My Father, I agree to all you ask on condition, nevertheless, that you will not prevent us from going to war, and that you will let us have your son as a witness of our actions.”⁷⁴ La Vérendrye seems to have agreed to these conditions and put on a good performance, “In presenting the hatchet to him I sang the war song, after which I wept for their dead.”⁷⁵ At this point, the war was put off until the spring wherein the warriors would reconvene at Fort St. Charles to collect powder, ammunition, and most importantly his eldest son, Jean-Baptiste de la Vérendrye.

La Vérendrye distributed tobacco, presented the hatchet, sang the war song, and even wept for the dead. As White notes, “those operating in the middle ground acted for interests derived from their own culture, but they had to convince people of another culture that some mutual action was fair and legitimate.”⁷⁶ Indeed, La Vérendrye understood the importance of adhering to the legitimacy of the Cree-Monsoni culture of warfare. He also understood the importance of exchanging gifts for Algonquian societies; goods exchanged hands virtually every time the French-Algonquian alliance came to a diplomatic compromise or decision.⁷⁷ French imperial politics also emerged in the deliberations: La Vérendrye attempted to bind the recognized war chief to him through the symbolic use of the French flag. Despite La Vérendrye’s use of Cree-Monsoni cultural conventions and efforts to bind them to the imperial centre of the alliance, however, he was unable to prevent the war against the Dakota and Anishinaabe. He only managed to delay the war party until spring, and at the expense of his son’s accompaniment, and also by promising generous gifts of firearms and ammunition.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 170.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ White, The Middle Ground, 52.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 94.

In May 1734, the French who had wintered at Fort St. Pierre arrived at Fort St. Charles with nearly 400 Monsoni warriors armed for war, “who began singing the war song the same evening.”⁷⁸ The war chief repeated the conditions that had been stated and agreed upon by both sides at Fort St. Pierre in the winter. The war chief reiterated that Jean-Baptiste accompany them on the warpath: “If you are willing to let us have your son to come with us, we will go straight wherever you tell us; but if you refuse I cannot answer for where the blow may fall... I am chief, it is true, but I am not always the master of their will.”⁷⁹ The war chief confessed that only Jean-Baptiste de la Vérendrye would be able to lead the war party to the most suitable enemy; otherwise, as the war chief threatened, the blow could very well fall upon the Dakota or Anishinaabe, who La Vérendrye wanted to avoid provoking.

Although Jean-Baptiste was still “passionately desirous of going,” La Vérendrye was still reluctant: “I was agitated, I must confess, and cruelly tormented by conflicting thoughts.”⁸⁰ Naturally, La Vérendrye feared for his son’s safety as the Cree and Monsoni sought to war against the Mascoutens Poüanes, a nation with which he was unfamiliar. He wondered, “how am I to entrust my eldest son to barbarians whom I did not know [Cree-Monsoni], and whose name even I scarcely knew, to go and fight against other barbarians of whose name and of whose strength I knew nothing? Who could tell whether my son would ever return?”⁸¹ This was indeed a surprising confession for the officer who claimed to be the “mouth piece” of Onontio in the *Petit Nord*. Indigenous historian Michael Witgen has observed that this “confession was a candid

⁷⁸ La Vérendrye, *Report in Journal form (1733-1734)*, 174.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 175-176.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 175.

admission that the French did not really know the names of many of the Native peoples they claimed as the subjects of empire.”⁸²

La Vérendrye wrote that “In this dilemma I consulted all the most intelligent Frenchmen of my post and those best able to give advice... They said that my son would not be the first Frenchman who had gone with savages to war.”⁸³ If La Vérendrye refused his son, he worried that “there was much reason to fear that they would attribute it to fear and take the French for cowards, with the result of their shaking off the French yoke.”⁸⁴ Wishing to solidify and consolidate his alliance with the Cree-Monsoni, La Vérendrye permitted Jean-Baptiste to accompany the war party, but in a limited capacity. The Cree-Monsoni had wished to place Jean-Baptiste “at their head and make him their first chief.”⁸⁵ La Vérendrye would only permit him to accompany them “as their counsellor and witness of their valour.”⁸⁶ Witgen has argued that La Vérendrye’s “sacrifice” of his son to the war party demonstrated the loss of French power in the alliance system in the *Petit Nord*. Witgen observes that this was “a different era, and these were a different kind of children. They would return only to demand that Onontio prove his willingness to sacrifice his body if he wanted to preserve his alliance with them.”⁸⁷

La Vérendrye warned the Cree-Monsoni war party to listen obediently to Jean-Baptiste, to “consider him as another myself,” and to take care of him, “as he is not as accustomed to fatigue as you.”⁸⁸ A dispute arose almost immediately over Jean-Baptiste between the Cree and Monsoni. Both Cree and Monsoni warriors seem to have greatly desired to carry him in their canoes. Jean-Baptiste was able to resolve the situation rather diplomatically, “My brothers, do

⁸² Michael Witgen, *An Infinity of Nations: How the Native New World Shaped Early North America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 306.

⁸³ La Vérendrye, *Report in Journal form (1733-1734)*, 176.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 175-176.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 177.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*.

⁸⁷ Witgen, *An Infinity of Nations*, 306.

⁸⁸ La Vérendrye, *Report in Journal form (1733-1734)*, 180.

not be vexed, I beg of you, if I embark with the Cree; we are all marching together; your cabins are mine and we are all one.”⁸⁹ Jean-Baptiste de la Vérendrye seems to have been of paramount importance as a figurehead to both the Cree and Monsoni. For an unknown reason, however, Jean-Baptiste seems to have turned back from the war party, Beauharnois later wrote that “the young man had turned back and had not taken any part in the war.”⁹⁰ La Vérendrye himself left no account of his son’s role in the Cree and Monsoni in the expedition against the Dakota and Anishinaabe in 1734.

Witgen argues that “La Vérendrye was asked to gamble the life of his son by entering into a world of Native politics and warfare where the French had very little standing, and even less understanding.”⁹¹ Therefore, Beauharnois’s vague assertion that Jean-Baptiste took no part in the war is dubious. It seems unlikely that La Vérendrye would have been able to maintain his position at the western posts if the Cree and Monsoni perceived of the French as cowards. Considering that the Cree and Monsoni were going against the Mascoutens Potianes on the Northern Great Plains, it also seems unlikely that Jean-Baptiste would even have been able to find his way back to the relative safety of the French western posts in the *Petit Nord*. Either way, the ceremonial formation of the war party at Fort St. Charles in May 1734, as well as the subsequent public appropriation of Jean-Baptiste into both the Crees and Monsonis’ canoes, implicated that the French had become entangled in Cree-Monsoni inter-village patterns of warfare. The Cree and Monsoni sought to implicate the French in their raid on the Dakota, “They counted on the fact that the Dakota would consider La Vérendrye’s son to be another version of

⁸⁹ Ibid, 181.

⁹⁰ Charles de la Boische, Marquis de Beauharnois, “Affair of the murder of twenty-one voyageurs at the Lake of the Woods, in the month of June 1736,” in *Journals and Letters*, ed. and trans. Lawrence J. Burpee, 264.

⁹¹ Witgen, *An Infinity of Nations*, 307.

himself.”⁹² As Witgen argues, “The French had become expendable pawns in a Native power struggle for dominance of the western interior of North America, and La Vérendrye had given up his son as part of a power struggle he could not fully understand.”⁹³

Two years later, on 8 June 1736, a tragedy occurred when a Dakota war party ambushed and massacred Jean-Baptiste, along with the Jesuit missionary priest Father Aulneau and nineteen other Frenchmen, on a small island in the Lake of the Woods. Immediately, La Vérendrye’s allies clamoured for vengeance for Jean-Baptiste’s murder, after which his status as chief and importance to the Cree-Monsoni became even more apparent. In August 1736, two Cree and Monsoni deputies told La Vérendrye that “they were weeping incessantly day and night, they, their women and their children, for the death of my son whom they had adopted as chief of the two nations.”⁹⁴ Moreover, the Assiniboine seemed to have also adopted Jean-Baptiste as their chief for the role that he played in the establishment of Fort Maurepas on the Red River in 1734. The Lake Winnipeg Cree and the Assiniboine told La Vérendrye, “to let them know if I intend to go and avenge the blood of the French, and particularly that of my son, whom they had adopted as their chief from the time when he was building that fort [Maurepas] in their country, and whose death they had all never ceased to bewail.”⁹⁵

The war chiefs of the Cree and the Monsoni proposed “to place me [La Vérendrye] and go avenge the death of my son and the other Frenchmen.”⁹⁶ La Vérendrye seems to have personally desired to undertake a war of vengeance for the death of his son and the other Frenchmen. Colonial politics, however, prevented the course of vengeance against the Dakota.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid, 309-310.

⁹⁴ Pierre Gaultier de La Vérendrye, “Report of the Sieur de la Vérendrye, Lieutenant of the troops and Commandant of the posts of the West, Presented to Monsieur the Marquis de Beauharnois, Governor-General of New France, to be sent to the Court (1736-1737),” in *Journals and Letters*, ed. and trans. Lawrence J. Burpee, 221.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 222.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 220.

La Vérendrye told his native allies that he had written to the Governor-General Beauharnois and would thus have to “first wait to get word from their Father and that I would communicate it to them,” and he “thanked them for their goodwill.”⁹⁷ The following week, two other chiefs told La Vérendrye that they were also weeping incessantly over the death of Jean-Baptiste; the chiefs assured him that “they were all ready to move against the enemy, and asked me for vengeance.”⁹⁸ Once again, La Vérendrye made the same awkward and clumsy reply that he could not act until instructions arrived from Montreal. Concerning the death of his eldest son, La Vérendrye could only say: “know, my children, that the French never undertake war without having consulted their Father and only do it by his order: you see therefore that, however angry I may be, my arms are tied.”⁹⁹ The imperial strategy of *Pax Gallica* would damage La Vérendrye’s honour and reputability in the eyes of the Cree and Assiniboine.

In an attempt to prevent further bloodshed, La Vérendrye harangued the war chiefs to make peace and not war because the Cree, Assiniboine, and Dakota were all “children of the same Father.”¹⁰⁰ The Cree and Assiniboine were not particularly pleased to learn that the Dakota, their traditional enemies, were now being designated as their brothers. Thirty years earlier, the Dakota had not been included in the 1701 Treaty of Montreal due to the adamant refusal of the Great Lakes nations. Havard notes that the Great Lakes allies, “who were at war with the Sioux, refused to extend the roots of the Tree of Peace westward; unlike the French, they did not want to include the Sioux in the alliance.”¹⁰¹ In 1701, the French had desired to broaden the network of alliance to the Dakota; however, the Great Lakes nations imposed a limit on who could become one of Onontio’s children. The Cree, who had been present at the peace

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 221.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 229.

¹⁰⁰ La Vérendrye, Report in Journal form (1733-1734), 169.

¹⁰¹ Havard, The Great Peace of Montreal, 123.

conference in some capacity, agreed to the “limits on the westward extension of the roots of the Tree of Peace.”¹⁰² The Dakota, for their part, had refused to send any delegates to the general peace conference in Montreal.¹⁰³

The French had attempted to reopen commercial ties with the Dakota following the French-Algonquian alliance defeat of the Wisconsin Fox in 1732.¹⁰⁴ The Dakota sided with the French traders and even clashed with the Foxes over the issue of French commercial presence. Gary Clayton Anderson has described the Fox wars as an event with a “momentous implications for the Dakotas, who no longer remained isolated from consistent colonial exploitation.”¹⁰⁵ A larger trading post was established near Lake Pepin and the Dakota were brought into the Onontio’s family and turned into “a commercially responsive people.”¹⁰⁶ Commercial exchange could simply not exist outside of the alliance. As White argues, the fur trade “was structured by the overarching political relationship of French fathers to their Algonquian children. This alliance provided the means for linking the Algonquian system of exchange, with its emphasis on the primacy of social relation, to a much larger world economy.”¹⁰⁷

Anderson argues that European traders were forced into the kinship obligations of the Indigenous socioeconomic system: “Kinship and economic ties also allowed access to the Dakota political system... [by] the creation of kinship ties, entire native descent groups could be

¹⁰² Ibid, 158.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 123.

¹⁰⁴ For a more detailed analysis of the Fox Wars see David Edmunds and Joseph L. Peyser, *The Fox Wars: The Mesquakie Challenge to New France* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993); Joseph L. Peyser, “The Fate of the Fox Survivors: A Dark Chapter in the History of the French in the Upper Country, 1726-1737,” *The State Historical Society of Wisconsin* 73 (1990): 83-110; Brett Rushforth, “Slavery, the Fox Wars, and the Limits of Alliance,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 63 (2006): 777-808.

¹⁰⁵ Gary Clayton Anderson, *Kinsmen of Another Kind: Dakota-White Relations in the Upper Mississippi Valley, 1650-1862* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 41.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 42.

¹⁰⁷ White, *The Middle Ground*, 104-105.

obligated to hunt for their benefit and to turn their pelts over to their new relative, the trader.”¹⁰⁸

Similarly, Paul C. Thistle has argued that “in band societies such as that of the Cree, trade automatically encompasses social relationships and obligations, and all exchange is a social – not merely an economic process.”¹⁰⁹ Therefore, the establishment of a trade agreement with the Cree or Dakota automatically instigated a sociopolitical protocol of kinship and reciprocity; trade was not simply an economic exchange or process. In indigenous societies, gift giving was a sign and function of kinship bonds, a lasting familial bond that was constructed through reciprocal material exchange. Thistle argues that the Cree sought to “impose their conceptions of proper kin-like behaviour on the traders.”¹¹⁰

The French had thus extended the alliance to the Dakota, against the greater wishes of the Cree and Assiniboine. Similarly, the Dakota were not content with the inclusion of the Cree and Assiniboine as children in Onontio’s family. In particular, the Dakota were aggrieved by the amount of firearms and ammunition that La Vérendrye was placing directly in the hands of their sworn enemies, the Cree and Assiniboine. As Anderson comments, “the French seemed oblivious to the impact their growing commercial system was having on intertribal relations.”¹¹¹ The sole hope for the preservation of French presence would have been a policy of strict neutrality; however, village politics and kinship obligations had dictated that La Vérendrye allow his son, Jean-Baptise, to accompany the war party against the Mascoutens Poïanes. Unbeknownst to La Vérendrye, the Mascoutens Poïanes were the Dakota of the Prairies. Moreover, the woodland-based Dakota, amongst whom the French had established themselves

¹⁰⁸ Anderson, *Kinsmen of Another Kind*, 30-31.

¹⁰⁹ Paul C. Thistle, *Indian-European Trade Relations* (Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 1986), 18.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 47.

¹¹¹ Anderson, *Kinsmen of Another Kind*, 42-43.

around Lake Pepin, now spent much of the summers hunting buffalo on the prairies. This made clashes between the Dakota and the growing Cree-Assiniboine coalition inevitable.¹¹²

The Dakota seem to have been generally reviled by all the Algonquian nations of the Great Lakes region. White notes that in the seventeenth century the Jesuits had referred to the Dakota as the “Iroquois of the West.”¹¹³ Despite their formidable reputation in the seventeenth century, the Dakota seem to have been reduced to the defensive against the Cree and Assiniboine’s joint-onslaught by the time of La Vérendrye’s arrival. Concerning Cree-Dakota inter-village violence, the Governor-General Beauharnois complained that “it is a most annoying thing” that the alliance “should be destroyed for causes so trifling as those which move the minds of the savages, but their character is such and their manners are so odd and so little governed by ordinary sense.”¹¹⁴ Bitterly, Beauharnois remarked that the natives “throw away on the impulse of the moment all the advantages [of the alliance] which they have long enjoyed... Such is the inclination, such the genius of the savage.”¹¹⁵ Conversely, the Algonquian-speaking Indians of the *pays d’en haut* had complained to Onontio: “You make war against the English, so let us go against the Sioux.”¹¹⁶

Following the 1736 Lake of the Woods massacre, La Vérendrye’s reputation and ability to mediate and negotiate Onontio’s terms of the French alliance seem to have diminished significantly. This might have occurred for two separate reasons. First, La Vérendrye’s own personal reputation diminished because he seemed unwilling or unable to avenge the death of his own son, Jean-Baptiste, whom the Cree and Assiniboine had adopted as the “chief of the two

¹¹² La Vérendrye, Report in Journal form (1733-1734), 137-139.

¹¹³ White, The Middle Ground, 11.

¹¹⁴ Charles de la Boische, Marquis de Beauharnois, “Beauharnois to Maurepas,” in *Journals and Letters*, ed. and trans. Lawrence J. Burpee, 285.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 285-286.

¹¹⁶ Havard, The Great Peace of Montreal of 1701, 177.

nations.” La Vérendrye no longer seemed to be a suitable representative or “mouth piece” of Onontio. Second, Onontio failed to provide for the needs of his children. As White argues, “the obligation of Onontio to provide for the needs of his children became the basis for trade, and this in turn obligated the Algonquians, as good and satisfied children, to obey and aid him... to conceptualize exchange as the means by which their father provided for their needs.”¹¹⁷ The politics of the village began to supersede the interests of the French imperial centre.

Initially, La Vérendrye had taken careful measures to construct a French reputation of courage and valour. Indeed, La Vérendrye understood the tenets of the Cree-Assiniboine culture of warfare and sought to emulate those attributes. La Vérendrye attempted to justify his own actions in the terms of what he perceived to be the cultural premises of his allies.¹¹⁸ In 1734, La Vérendrye “gave them [Cree-Monsoni] a brief account of the manner of making war in France, where men did not fight behind trees but in open country, etc. I showed them the wounds I had received in the battle of Malplaquet, which astonished them.”¹¹⁹ In Cree society, storytelling and the recounting of previous battles was an essential component of a warrior’s reputation in society. John S. Milloy has argued that “throughout his life the warrior was given the opportunity to reinforce his status by recounting his war record.”¹²⁰ If a man were foolish enough to falsify or exaggerate his deeds, he would certainly be challenged by anyone who had been on the party with him.¹²¹ La Vérendrye was unable to substantiate the French warrior reputation which he had constructed through storytelling and bravado. La Vérendrye’s condemnation of a vengeful war against the Dakota denied some of the principal Indigenous tenets and codes of warfare –

¹¹⁷ White, *The Middle Ground*, 112.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, 52.

¹¹⁹ La Vérendrye, *Report in Journal form (1733-1734)*, 181-182.

¹²⁰ John S. Milloy, *The Plains Cree* (Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 1988), 76-77.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 77.

honour, prestige, vengeance and blood feuds, and the wars of mourning.¹²² Jean-Baptiste de la Vérendrye had been adopted as kin amongst the Cree-Assiniboine and had been hailed as the “chief of the two nations.” Therefore, La Vérendrye was not only disallowing the Cree-Assiniboine from avenging the death of his own son, but he was also preventing them from avenging the death of their own adoptive chief.

White argues that the “failure to secure a *bon marché* strained the alliance to the breaking point.”¹²³ La Vérendrye’s inability to adequately maintain supplied trading posts put considerable strain on the French-Algonquian alliance in the *Petit Nord*. The Cree and Assiniboine framed the French failure to provide for their needs within the familial logic of the alliance. It was proof that the French no longer “loved” them.¹²⁴ La Colle, a Monsoni chief, having conferred with the Cree and Assiniboine chiefs, made a speech to La Vérendrye in which he stated:

My Father, when you came into our land brought us things that we needed, and promised to continue doing so. For two years we lacked nothing, now we lack everything... You forbade us to go to the English and we obeyed you, and if now we are compelled to go there to get guns, powder, kettles, tobacco, etc, you must only blame your own people. This collar is to tell you go yourself to see our Father at Montreal and represent our needs to him so that he may have pity on us. You will assure him that we are his true children.¹²⁵

¹²² For a more in depth analysis of Native American warfare, see for example Wayne E. Lee, “Peace Chiefs and Blood Revenge: Patterns of Restraint in Native American Warfare, 1500-1800,” *Journal of Military History*, 71 (2007), 701-741; Douglas B. Bamforth, “Indigenous People, Indigenous Violence: Precontact Warfare on the North American Great Plains,” *Man*, 29 (1994), 95-115; Katherine L. Reedy-Maschner and Herbert D. G. Maschner, “Marauding Middlemen: Western Expansion and Violent Conflict in the Subarctic,” *Ethnohistory* 4 (1999), 703-743; Armstrong Starkey, *European and Native American Warfare 1675-1815* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998); Patrick Malone, *The Skulking Way of War* (Lanham: Madison Books, 1991).

¹²³ White, *The Middle Ground*, 116.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 117.

¹²⁵ La Vérendrye, *Report of the Sieur de la Vérendrye (1736)*, in *Journals and Letters*, ed. and trans. Lawrence J. Burpee, 231-232.

Appeals to Onontio's paternal duty were tactics employed by the Algonquian participants in the fur trade.¹²⁶ By 1736, the Cree and Assiniboine were beginning to doubt Onontio's "love for them."¹²⁷ La Vérendrye forbade them to trade with the Hudson's Bay Company traders; however, with French goods lacking, the Cree and Assiniboine willingly returned to trade with the English.

La Vérendrye's role in the formation of war parties also seems to have completely dissipated. Upon the formation of a war party to attack the Dakota, La Colle assured La Vérendrye that "it is no longer you who are taking any part in it [the war]; it is I and the chiefs of the three tribes."¹²⁸ Despite his exclusion, La Vérendrye wrote that he nevertheless spoke to the Cree and Assiniboine of the French King's victories in the War of the Polish Succession – "I spoke of the victories which the King had gained, the towns he had taken from his enemies, etc."¹²⁹ Optimistically, he wrote that the Cree audience "listened with attention," and that the news of King Louis XV's victories "seemed to give them pleasure."¹³⁰ However, these were merely stories of a far-removed war in a faraway country. The Cree and Assiniboine were dissatisfied with the lack of substantiated French bravado, and of Onontio's failure to provide for their needs.

Several incidents during La Vérendrye's 1738/1739 voyage over the Northern Great Plains to the Mandan villages on the Missouri River Valley also indicate that the French reputation had diminished amongst the Cree and Assiniboine. Being completely at the mercy of his Assiniboine guides, La Vérendrye complained that "We spent forty-six days covering a distance which we might easily have covered in sixteen, or twenty at the most... nothing that I

¹²⁶ White, *The Middle Ground*, 118.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ La Vérendrye, *Report of the Sieur de la Vérendrye (1736-1737)*, 232.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 252.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

could say to the guide to make him hasten had any effect.”¹³¹ The Assiniboine were not merely traveling for the purpose of trading. They traveled with whole families and deliberately moved slowly to hunt and to build up a surplus of meat en route. The Assiniboine exploited the grassland environment in the process of carrying out their annual trading expedition to the Mandan.¹³² En route to the Mandan villages, a “rascally” Assiniboine youth stole La Vérendrye’s bag, “in which were my papers and many things for my own use.”¹³³ After the party had arrived at the Mandan village, La Vérendrye’s Assiniboine interpreter decamped and chased after an Assiniboine woman with whom he was enamoured, despite the fact that the he had “assured me [La Vérendrye] that he would always stay with me and never abandon me.”¹³⁴ La Vérendrye and his sons were reduced to “trying to make ourselves understood by signs and gestures.”¹³⁵ A promise made to Onontio’s representative seems to have had little consequence by this period, and could be broken without significant repercussions.

In the spring of 1741, the war chief of the Monsoni, La Colle, had undertaken a devastating campaign against the Dakota. La Colle’s war party killed seventy Dakota warriors and captured about two-hundred slaves.¹³⁶ “Beauharnois reported that La Colle had only lost six men in the successful campaign and that “they [the Monsoni and Cree] had already sung the war song” for a new war the following season.¹³⁷ La Vérendrye wrote that “I made every possible effort to get them to abandon their design, but without success, in spite of all the presents which I

¹³¹ Pierre Gaultier de La Vérendrye, “Journal in the form of a letter covering the period from the 20th of July 1738, when I left Michilimackinac, to May, 1739, sent to the Marquis de Beauharnois (1738-1739),” in *Journals and Letters*, ed. and trans. Lawrence J. Burpee, 312-313.

¹³² Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Hunters, Trappers and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay 1660-1870* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 38-39.

¹³³ La Vérendrye, *Journal in the form of a letter (1738-1739)*, 324.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 334.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ Brett Rushforth, *Bonds of Alliance: Indigenous and Atlantic Slavery in New France* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 245.

¹³⁷ Charles de la Boische, Marquis de Beauharnois, “Beauharnois to Maurepas, Quebec, September 24, 1742,” in *Journals and Letters*, ed. and trans. Lawrence J. Burpee, 380-381.

gave and caused to be given for that purpose.”¹³⁸ It seems by this point that the material basis of the alliance could not dissuade the Cree and Assiniboine from fulfilling the more immediate political needs of the village. In 1741, a middle ground wherein La Vérendrye could operate no longer existed in the *Petit Nord*. Village politics and rivalries overruled the French imperial centre and Onontio’s desires.

Due to his inability to avenge his son’s death, La Vérendrye’s personal reputation was discredited in the Cree and Assiniboine culture of warfare, which perceived his refusal as an act of cowardice. Moreover, the Cree and Assiniboine were dissatisfied with French mediation and the imposition of the Dakota, their enemies from “time immemorial,” as their brothers and allies. Onontio’s failure to provide adequately for the needs of his children discredited the French imperial centre of the alliance. Therefore, Indigenous village politics superseded the interests of the Father in Montreal, as well as his mouthpiece and imperial agent, La Vérendrye. The French presence in the *Petit Nord* and Northern Great Plains cannot be adequately explained or analysed through simple stories of exploration, colonialism, and conquest. An analysis of the strategy of the *Pax Gallica* and rhetoric of the middle ground restores an understanding of the autonomy exercised by the Cree, Assiniboine, and Dakota in the *Petit Nord*.

¹³⁸ Pierre Gaultier de La Vérendrye, “Report of the Sieur de la Verendrye on the subject of the establishments made by him with the object of effecting the discovery of the Western Sea, under instructions from Monsieur the Marquis de Beauharnois, Governor-General of New France, in the year 1731 (1744),” in *Journals and Letters*, ed. and trans. Lawrence J. Burpee, 454-455.

Chapter II

The Native Ground: Indigenous Autonomy in the *Petit Nord*

The middle ground of the *pays d'en haut* existed in two distinct forms. White argues that the middle ground emerged as “both a product of everyday life and a product of formal diplomatic relations between distinct peoples.”¹³⁹ In the previous chapter, I have examined the middle ground as a product of diplomatic relations. In this realm, La Vérendrye seems to have almost entirely failed to incorporate the Cree and Assiniboine village politics into the French imperial centre of the alliance. La Vérendrye had sought to make the Cree and Assiniboine children of Onontio, “the Great Chief of the French.”¹⁴⁰

Native American historian Kathleen DuVal has proposed the framework of the “native ground” to counter the inclination of historians who “have tended to assume that Native Americans *wanted* to construct middle grounds with Europeans.”¹⁴¹ DuVal has blamed “White’s masterful book” as the catalyst for many historians’ assumptions that Indigenous peoples wanted to attain a level of cross-cultural compromise and understanding with the European newcomers. DuVal has argued that only Indigenous groups already weakened by disease epidemics and embattled by war *wanted* to create a middle ground with European newcomers. On the other hand, “cohesive native peoples preferred to maintain their own sovereign identities and make independent decisions regarding the ways they ran their societies and the use to which they put their land resources.”¹⁴²

¹³⁹ White, *The Middle Ground*, 53.

¹⁴⁰ The Chevalier de la Vérendrye, “Journal of the Expedition of the Chevalier de la Vérendrye and one of his brothers to reach the Western Sea, addressed to M. the Marquis de Beauharnois (1742-43),” in *Journals and Letters*, ed. and trans. Lawrence J. Burpee, 419-420.

¹⁴¹ Kathleen DuVal, *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 5.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

DuVal examined the Quapaw Indians of the Arkansas River Valley and their interactions with French officers from Louisiana in the eighteenth century. Although geographically distant from the *pays d'en haut* and the *Petit Nord*, the concept of the “native ground” is nevertheless a suitable framework to examine French-Indigenous cohabitation at the western posts. The Cree and Assiniboine of the *Petit Nord* and Northern Great Plains permitted La Vérendrye and his men to construct forts in their territory not because they were a colonized people, but because they were willing and desired to incorporate French into their societies. DuVal notes that on the native ground “European colonialism met neither accommodation nor resistance but incorporation.”¹⁴³ Indigenous peoples sought to draw European merchants and traders into their own local patterns of land and resource allocation, sustenance, goods exchange, gender relations, diplomacy, and warfare. Certainly, the Cree and Assiniboine were willing to accommodate La Vérendrye and his Frenchmen to a degree; the access to European goods and firearms alone seems to have been worth the effort. DuVal has also argued that on the native ground “To be isolated was always to court disaster.”¹⁴⁴ Therefore, Indigenous peoples also sought links of interdependence as a form of power, “A wide network of diplomatic exchange brought in powerful goods and knowledge and could potentially raise allied armies in times of war.”¹⁴⁵ Historian Cary Miller has also argued that Algonquian-speaking natives of the *pays d'en haut* “sought relationships of interdependency not only with neighbouring communities but also with all categories of being that inhabited their world.”¹⁴⁶ La Vérendrye and the French merely became another connection in a very wide-ranging network of diplomatic exchange.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 16.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Cary Miller, “Gifts as Treaties: The Political Use of Received Gifts in Anishinaabeg Communities, 1820-1832,” *American Indian Quarterly* 26 (2002), 222-223.

Prior to La Vérendrye's arrival in the *Petit Nord*, the Cree and Assiniboine were already in an advantageous position. The Cree and Assiniboine military alliance monopolized the English trading posts on Hudson Bay. The Cree and Assiniboine were the middlemen of the fur trade with the Hudson's Bay Company and profited greatly from this delicately balanced system. Arthur J. Ray argues that the inland penetration of the French under La Vérendrye did not significantly affect the Cree and Assiniboine middlemen trade alliance. Rather, "the French [presence] merely made it unnecessary for some of the Assiniboine and Cree middlemen to make the long trek from the Bay."¹⁴⁷ For their part, the Cree Assiniboine acquired more European trading partners, while still continuing to exploit and to acquire furs from the same aboriginal trading partners – the Blackfoot, the Gros Ventre, the Mandan, and Hidatsa.¹⁴⁸ As a result, Ray argues, the Cree and Assiniboine "managed to obtain nearly all of the furs they required to satisfy their own demand for goods, and.... very few of them did their own trapping."¹⁴⁹ This must have made La Vérendrye's frequent lectures on the importance of hunting and trapping rather redundant. La Vérendrye often exhorted the Cree and Assiniboine "to hunt vigorously in order that they might have wherewithal to trade with the French, as that was the way to live in good understanding and to have the means of supplying the comforts to their families."¹⁵⁰ La Vérendrye seems to have had no inclination that the Cree and Assiniboine were acquiring their furs from other peoples and were merely benefiting from their unique position as middlemen in the fur trade.

The Cree and Assiniboine position of middlemen was not retained by violence and warfare alone. Rather, the Indigenous groups that had migrated to the Plains became unable to

¹⁴⁷ Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Hunters, Trappers and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay 1660-1870* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 69.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ La Vérendrye, Report of the Sieur de la Vérendrye (1736-1737), 252.

voyage by canoe to York Factory due to their adoption of the horse in substitution and in replacement of the canoe. Moreover, the long voyage to York Factory was difficult enough for the Cree; the Plains nations would have been even more hard pressed for provisions, as “hunting en route” was a less than ideal practice. Ultimately, the Plains nations “ran a considerable risk of facing starvation when undertaking their trading expeditions to York Factory.”¹⁵¹ It was simply more expedient to trade with the middlemen, even at inflated bartering prices. Throughout the mid-eighteenth century the Cree and Assiniboine coalition maintained a powerful position by cleverly incorporating both the English and French imperial powers onto the native ground. The exclusive access to European firearms, gunpowder, and ammunition allowed them to decide the amount of weapons would fall into the hands of their potential enemies and rival groups.

Although he tried, La Vérendrye was unable to use to threat of economic and trade withdrawal to force the Cree and Assiniboine back onto the middle ground. From La Vérendrye’s perspective, the Cree and Assiniboine were behaving like disobedient children and were disrespecting the wishes of their Father. Onontio, the “Great Chief of the French” wanted the Cree and Assiniboine to stop trading with the HBC traders and to cease their raids against the Dakota. In the *pays d’en haut*, Onontio’s name and title was a powerful force and held influence. For example, a Jesuit missionary once stated to a mixed assembly of Great Lakes nations: “You know about Onontio, that famous Captain of Quebec. You know and feel that he is the terror of the Iroquois, and that his very name makes them tremble, now that he has laid waste their country and set fire to their Villages.”¹⁵² Many of those nations had not been to Montreal and had not seen the cannons, the stone fortifications, and the great wooden ships on the Saint

¹⁵¹ Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*, 60.

¹⁵² Father Father Claude Dablon, “Taking Possession in the King’s Name of all the Countries Commonly Included Under the Designation Outaouac,” in *The Jesuits Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in North America (1610-1791)*, ed. Edna Kenton (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Publishers, 1925), 331.

Lawrence. The 1701 Great Peace of Montreal had at least ensured that a delegation from each nation had at least visited Montreal and had seen Onontio in flesh. Onontio was known by name and reputation throughout the *pays d'en haut*.

In another instance, when the Jesuit missionary Father Claude-Jean Allouez was abandoned by his Wendat guides in 1665, he compelled them to take him by employing the name of Onontio. Allouez chastised them: “How is this? ...do you thus forsake the French? Know you not that I hold Onontio’s voice in my hands, and that I am to speak for him, through the presents he entrusted to me, to all your nations?”¹⁵³ Contrarily, in the *Petit Nord*, the Monsoni chief La Colle reversed roles with the French, by invoking of the power of Onontio’s name himself. The Monsoni chief had chastised La Vérendrye, “This collar is to tell you go yourself to see our Father at Montreal and represent our needs to him.”¹⁵⁴ By presenting a collar and invoking Onontio’s name, La Colle compelled La Vérendrye to go to Montreal and to rectify the deplorable supply situation at the posts.¹⁵⁵ In the mean time, however, the Cree and Assiniboine would have to return to the HBC posts for that trade season. In the *Petit Nord*, Onontio’s name still held sway, but was not always wielded by French imperial agents.

“The beaver does everything perfectly well,” a Cree man once remarked, “It makes kettles, hatchets, swords, knives, bread: in short, it makes everything.”¹⁵⁶ Although the beaver had become a remarkable animal in North America, Native Americans were unwilling to alter their traditional hunting patterns to acquire it at absolutely any cost.¹⁵⁷ In fact, the French seemed

¹⁵³ Father Claude-Jean Allouez, “Journal of Father Claude Allouez’s Voyage into the Outaouac Country,” in *The Jesuits Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in North America (1610-1791)*, ed. Edna Kenton (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Publishers, 1925), 316.

¹⁵⁴ La Vérendrye, *Report of the Sieur de la Vérendrye (1736-1737)*, 231-232.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ Susan Sleeper-Smith, “Agricultural Dynamics of the Columbian Exchange,” in *Transatlantic Rebels: Agrarian Radicalism in Comparative Context*, ed. Thomas Summerhill, James C. Scott (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2004), 12.

¹⁵⁷ DuVal, *The Native Ground*, 75.

to desire the beaver more than the Cree and Assiniboine desired European goods and firearms. The securing of European goods was not essential to basic survival nor did the Indigenous nations strive at absolutely any cost to secure these objects. Indigenous societies seem to have been rather content to use European goods for a short while before trading them or giving them away as gifts. White has observed that European trade goods in Algonquian societies were transient and that “the distribution of goods created obligation and established status... extending alliances and social relationships.”¹⁵⁸ Algonquians did not accumulate and hoard wealth in the same manner that Europeans did, rather the European trade goods were continuously passed onto others, “each recipient incurred a reciprocal obligation to the giver thus ensuring that goods were constantly in motion.”¹⁵⁹ Similarly, William A. Starna and José Antonio Brandao have argued that historians ought not to impose “European-derived economic motives” on Indigenous societies.¹⁶⁰ Indigenous peoples perceived and used European goods within their own cultural framework and premises on the native ground.

Arthur J. Ray has also argued that most Cree and Assiniboine would not have become dependent on European firearms prior to 1774.¹⁶¹ Therefore, the threat to cut off the flow of European goods and firearms would have inconvenienced, but would hardly have significantly harmed the Cree and Assiniboine societies. The explorer and trader Nicolas Perrot had once threatened to cut off the flow of European goods to his native associates if they did not obey the orders of the Onontio : “You forget that your ancestors and yourselves have been vagabonds until now; are you weary of living in comfort? Believe your Father, who will not abandon you

¹⁵⁸ White, *The Middle Ground*, 101.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ William A. Starna and José Antonio Brandao, “From the Mohawk-Mahican war to the Beaver Wars: Questioning the Pattern,” *Ethnohistory* 51 (2004), 740.

¹⁶¹ Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*, 73.

until you compel him to do so.”¹⁶² In reality, this threat was groundless as Indigenous reliance on European goods does seem not to have been as crucial as Perrot imagined. White has argued that even after a century of trade and contact, European manufactured goods failed to completely displace native manufactures because of the limited available cargo space on both canoes and the larger sailing ships.¹⁶³

White notes that when “supplies of powder failed at Detroit, the Ottawas, Huron-Petuns, Potawatomis and Chippewas there resumed hunting with bows and arrows.”¹⁶⁴ When Jean-Baptiste de La Vérendrye encountered the Assiniboine for the first time near the Lake of the Woods, he remarked how only about half of the male warriors carried muskets. In their eagerness and in true European fashion, the Assiniboine saluted Jean-Baptiste by discharging their firearms, “they uttered loud shouts of joy, and received him to the sound of three discharges of their guns and a flight of arrows, as all were not provided with gun.”¹⁶⁵ Certainly, the Assiniboine had hoped that their incorporation of the French into their networks would have procured firearms for all of their warriors. This was certainly the case for the Quapaws in the Arkansas Valley, where the French were able to fully arm all male Quapaw warriors by the 1740s.¹⁶⁶ In 1737, at Fort Maurepas, an Assiniboine chief asked that La Vérendrye keep his promise and establish a fort amongst them: “he hoped that I would, nevertheless, keep my word this year; that his tribe offered me all the help in their power for that purpose, and that they would form a village at the spot in order to reside permanently near the fort.”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶² Nicolas Perrot, *The Indian tribes of the upper Mississippi Valley and region of the Great Lakes as described by Nicolas Perrot, French commandant in the Northwest*, editor and trans. Emma Helen Blair (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1911), 356.

¹⁶³ White, *The Middle Ground*, 135.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ La Vérendrye, *Report in Journal form (1733-1734)*, 145.

¹⁶⁶ Duval, *The Native Ground*, 98.

¹⁶⁷ La Vérendrye, *Report in Journal form (1733-1734)*, 145.

The Assiniboine and Cree wanted to incorporate the French traders into their society, on the native ground. Trade and alliance with the French came with socio-political kinship obligations, dictated by indigenous social mores. Paul C. Thistle has argued that the Cree took their trade alliances with both the English and the French very seriously, “Europeans were obviously being tightly and deliberately integrated into the Cree socio-political system.”¹⁶⁸ In the Hudson Bay context, Arthur J. Ray has argued that a set of complex relationships had to be developed to enable trade between the English and Cree. Ray argues that the development of these series of complex trade devices tied the barter economy of the Indians into the “market-oriented enterprise” of the Hudson’s Bay Company.¹⁶⁹ Since Cree society lacked the conception of money, “the Hudson’s Bay Company was forced to devise a scheme which would allow them to keep records of their barter trade.”¹⁷⁰ Due to the competitive nature of the French and English trading posts, the Cree and Assiniboine traders and middlemen had become some of the most powerful figures in the fur trade of the *Petit Nord*; and, as Ray argues, “a pattern of trade had emerged in which the Assiniboine and Cree middlemen were the central figures.”¹⁷¹

Andrew E. LaBounty’s study of French fur traders and Ojibwe women at Grand Portage on Lake Superior exemplifies the socioeconomic importance of intermarriage in the fur trade. LaBounty has argued that “Ojibwe women were extremely welcoming of French men; second, French traders were willing (and expected by the Ojibwe) to marry into the population. This was in part because many Ojibwe women considered the fur trade such a boon that they were willing to be sexually ‘diplomatic.’”¹⁷² The fur trade was far more than a simply economic exchange,

¹⁶⁸ Paul C. Thistle, *Indian-European Trade Relations* (Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 1986), 9.

¹⁶⁹ Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*, 61.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁷² Andrew E. LaBounty, “This Countries Laides”: Gender Negotiations at the Northwest Company, Grand Portage,” *Nebraska Anthropologist* 24 (2009), 38.

rather the exchange of goods between the French and Aboriginal peoples entailed diplomacy, ceremony, and reciprocity. LaBounty argues that the fur trade “should be viewed as an agreement between groups of people; an exchange of friendship and alliances rather than the economic endeavour the French had expected.”¹⁷³ Therefore, it was entirely plausible and perhaps even necessary that La Vérendrye, his sons, and even his *engagés* took native wives to solidify their alliances, increase revenue from trade, and perhaps even to enjoy some companionship in the *Petit Nord*.

Sapoznik has analysed some of the Indigenous oral tradition surrounding Pierre de La Vérendrye’s Aboriginal wife. According to the “Anishinaabe oral traditional,” Sapoznik argues, “La Vérendrye’s Anishinaabe wife from the Winnipeg area was severely slighted by his marriage to Marie-Anne [his French wife]. According to oral tradition, she tried to poison Marie-Anne du Sablé when she accompanied him out West.”¹⁷⁴ No indication of the Anishinaabe wife or of his French wife Marie-Anne’s voyage to the western posts is evident in the colonial records. In fact, it would have been extremely unsuitable for Marie-Anne du Sablé to accompany her husband to the western posts, as she was responsible for La Vérendrye’s finances and merchant contacts in Montreal. A more thorough investigation of Indigenous oral histories must be undertaken to truly understand the implication of French-Indigenous relations in the *Petit Nord*. In some cases, the French and the English traders had become, quite literally, family with their Indigenous trade partners through intermarriage.

HBC traders were similarly encouraged to take indigenous wives by their Cree trading partners. Sylvia Van Kirk’s *Many Tender Ties* argues “that the Indians initially encouraged the

¹⁷³ Ibid, 37-38.

¹⁷⁴ Sapoznik, *La Vérendrye, Gender, Race and Slavery*, 27.

formation of marriage alliances between their women and the European traders.”¹⁷⁵ Similar to Thistle, Anderson, and LaBounty’s analyses, Van Kirk argues that the Cree viewed marriage in a socio-economic context; wherein a marriage created a “reciprocal social bond which served to consolidate his economic relationship with a stranger.”¹⁷⁶ Van Kirk notes that “it did not take the officers of the Hudson’s Bay Company long to realize that marriage to the daughter of a leading hunter or chief could secure not only the bountiful hunt of the father-in-law but that of his relations as well.”¹⁷⁷ Although the European traders benefited economically from the marriages, the institution of marriage alliances between indigenous women and European men was instigated by the Cree, and not solely by the French or the English desire for sexual companionship.

French and English traders were brought onto the native ground by their Cree and Assiniboine trade partners. European-Indigenous marriage, however, was not always characteristic of the native ground. For example, DuVal argues that the Quapaws of the lower Arkansas Valley fiercely opposed their indigenous women marrying into the French community. “The lack of a large *Métis* population,” DuVal argues, “suggests that the French wisely chose to respect Quapaw gender relations and guidelines for interactions” in the lower Arkansas Valley.¹⁷⁸ In the heart of North America, the French policy was dictated by the kinship obligations and social mores of their Indigenous counterparts. French policy fluctuated so drastically from region to region because it could simply not afford to be rigid and inflexible on the native ground.

¹⁷⁵ Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 28.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ DuVal, *The Native Ground*, 85.

Although the French operated on the native ground in the *Petit Nord*, La Vérendrye nevertheless continued to try to coerce the Cree and Assiniboine into their proper *roles* as children of Onontio, and as “subordinate allies” in the French alliance.¹⁷⁹ Unsuccessful, the French seem to have become the “subordinate allies” in the alliance in the *Petit Nord* as they looked to their hosts for provisions, nourishment, and guidance in the harsh environments of the *Petit Nord* and Northern Great Plains. In a 1736 letter, for example, Father Aulneau complained that all the male Cree warriors had departed to war against their enemies during the winter of 1735-1736, which consequently caused a food shortage for the French at Fort St. Charles. Aulneau wrote, “This war was the occasion for us of much suffering during the winter, as we had no other nourishment than tainted pike, boiled or dried over the fire.”¹⁸⁰ Certainly, Aulneau bemoaned the departure of the Cree men as their absence signified that there would be no good fresh game available from hunting. La Vérendrye also alluded to how the French were reliant on Cree hunters for nourishment throughout the winters. La Vérendrye wrote, “the ice took on the lake on the 22nd of November [1733], which caused 100 savages, men and women, who were on the other side of the lake to bring us meat and peltries. All the savages had great hunting up to Christmas, there being no snow.”¹⁸¹ En route to Fort Maurepas in February of 1737, La Vérendrye also remarked on the surplus of food that was provided to him by the Cree. He wrote, “Nearly every day I came to lodges of savages, who wished me *bon voyage* and offered me provisions that I had no need for, as the men who were with me killed two or three moose every

¹⁷⁹ Havard, *Protection and Unequal Alliance*, 118.

¹⁸⁰ Father Jean-Pierre Aulneau, “Father Jean P. Aulneau to Father Bonin. Fort St. Charles, among the Kristinaux, April 30, 1736,” in *The Aulneau Collection* (Montreal: Archives of St. Mary’s College, 1893), 76.

¹⁸¹ La Vérendrye, *Report in Journal form (1733-1734)*, 143.

day.”¹⁸² Numerous more examples of the Cree and the Assiniboine providing provisions for La Vérendrye and his Frenchmen are evident throughout the *Journals and Letters*.

La Vérendrye’s principal objective was exploration. On the native ground, exploration was hardly dictated by the will of the European “explorer,” rather La Vérendrye’s travels were dictated by various Indigenous peoples and groups from the very beginning. In 1727, when La Vérendrye was appointed as commandant of the fur trading post at the mouth of the Nipigon River, he first heard of the “Western Sea” from a Cree informant, named Auchagah.¹⁸³ Since establishing himself at fort St. Charles on the Lake of the Woods in 1732, La Vérendrye had become obsessed with the idea of travelling southwest over the Northern Great Plains and meeting the Ouachipouennes, who were otherwise called as “the Sioux who go Underground” by the Cree. The Cree said that these Ouachipouennes dwelled in houses “constructed of wood and earth” which were “built like French houses.”¹⁸⁴ The Cree and Assiniboine described the Ouachipouennes as being unlike “other savages,” for “some of them have light hair, some red and some black... they speak a language which has some resemblance to French but is quite unlike English.”¹⁸⁵

Up until recently, the Cree and Assiniboine had been at war with these people but had recently brokered a peace; the Assiniboine now undertook peaceful annual trips to the Missouri River Valley trade with them. The Ouachipouennes seem to have been the Mandan Indians, who, in the eighteenth century, resided on the banks of the Missouri River and two of its tributaries—the Heart and Knife Rivers—in present-day North and South Dakota. La Vérendrye had no

¹⁸² La Vérendrye, *Report of the Sieur de la Vérendrye (1736-1737)*, 243.

¹⁸³ Beauharnois, “Continuation of the Report of the Sieur de la Vérendrye touching upon the discovery of the Western Sea Annexed to the Letter of M. Beauharnois, of October 10, 1730,” in *Journals and Letters*, ed. and trans. Lawrence J. Burpee, 53.

¹⁸⁴ La Vérendrye, “La Vérendrye to Beauharnois, Fort St. Charles, May 25, 1733,” in *Journals and Letters*, ed. and trans. Lawrence J. Burpee, 101.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 107.

firsthand knowledge of the very distant nation and heavily relied upon the stories provided by the Cree and Assiniboine. In 1734, the Assiniboine described the Mandan as Caserniers, or “barrack dwellers,” they allegedly lived in forts and houses very similar to those of the French. The forts were equally impressive as they were “made of double rows of stakes with two bastions at opposite corners.”¹⁸⁶ These forts were surrounded by a defensive ditch and have double gates. Subterranean passages run underneath the forts, sometimes even to the river bank so it would be possible to embark without even being noticed by a besieging enemy. Furthermore, the Assiniboine noted that the Caserniers defended themselves with the “bow and arrow, buckler, axe, and dart, which is a kind of lance.”¹⁸⁷

The Assiniboine described the barrack dwellers as being of “very tall stature, well-proportioned, white, and walk with their toes turned out. Their hair is light in colour, chestnut and red; a few have black hair. They have beards which they cut or pull out, some, however, allowing them to grow.”¹⁸⁸ They are very industrious agriculturalists and they sow great quantities “of corn, beans, peas, oats, and other grains, which they trade with the neighbouring savages.”¹⁸⁹

La Vérendrye pressed the Assiniboine with further questions, “do you understand the language of the Ouachipouennes [Mandan], and could you tell me a few of their words like ‘fire,’ ‘water,’ etc.”¹⁹⁰ The Assiniboine chief, who had been recounting the story, told La Vérendrye that he had regrettably been amongst that nation for such a short time that he did not

¹⁸⁶ La Vérendrye, Report in Journal form (1733-1734), 154.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 156.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 154.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 155.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

properly retain “any words of their language.” He noted, however, that “they speak and sing like the French,” and that he believed “they were Frenchmen like us.”¹⁹¹

On the native ground, the Cree and Assiniboine held knowledge of not only navigation and direction, but also of faraway nations and places. They certainly benefitted from La Vérendrye’s desperation to make relevant discoveries for the French Crown. The Cree and Assiniboine recognized La Vérendrye’s desperation and cajoled the frantic explorer onwards with fantastic stories of these industrious “white savages,” who “sang like the French.”¹⁹² The Cree and Assiniboine recognized the reciprocal price of information. At the conclusion of a successful meeting, gifts would certainly be distributed. Particularly good information, which was pleasing to the French commandant, certainly brought about a higher payoff in gifts and compliments. For example, after gathering information about the Mandan from an Assiniboine delegation, La Vérendrye distributed “powder, ball, gun-flints, knives, awls and tobacco.”¹⁹³ Certainly, La Vérendrye gave these gifts as tokens of friendship and alliance, but the optimistic news that the Assiniboine were in annual contact with the Mandan meant that the French had to secure the good relations with these middlemen.

On October 18, 1738, La Vérendrye finally accompanied an Assiniboine trading expedition south to the Missouri River Valley. La Vérendrye wrote that their party consisted of “52 persons, twenty hired men, all good men, M. de Lamarque, his brother, my two sons, my servant and a slave, the rest being savages.”¹⁹⁴ As their journey progressed, many more Assiniboine families joined the southward expedition. “Every day”, the Assiniboine assured La Vérendrye and his associate, Monsieur de La Marque, “about the whites we were going to see,

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 159.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid, 162.

¹⁹⁴ La Vérendrye, Journal in the form of a letter (1738-1739), 315.

Frenchmen like ourselves, who said they were descended from us.”¹⁹⁵ La Vérendrye and La Marque made plans and relished in the possibilities and hope of “making a remarkable discovery.”¹⁹⁶

In the mid-continent, the French sought to extend the boundaries of their empire in North America. In the heartland of North America, where the French had no power to mediate, they relied on forging alliances with Indigenous groups to assert French sovereignty over their imperial rivals. On the native ground, DuVal argues, “Europeans gained their sovereignty vis-à-vis one another in part by piggy-backing on Indians’ sovereignty. Colonial administrators generally delineated the boundaries of their empires by referring to the native peoples with whom they had forged alliances.”¹⁹⁷ Therefore, La Vérendrye had to court the Assiniboine and the Mandan to not only open more trade opportunities and discoveries, but also to consolidate the boundaries of the French empire in the heart of North America.

Authority on the native ground was delineated differently than it had been in the more rigid social hierarchy of French society. La Vérendrye was the mouth piece of the French Crown and sought to negotiate with a chief of appropriate standing and distinction. DuVal argues that Indigenous leaders of the mid-continent did not have direct coercive power over their followers. For example, a “diplomatic chief” was only one of the many chiefs acting in a multitude of varying roles.¹⁹⁸ By the early seventeenth century, the mid-continental and Mississippian societies began to discourage concentrated power, and “probably returned to their own cultures’

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 316.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ DuVal, The Native Ground

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 72.

earlier nomadic taboos against storing wealth.”¹⁹⁹ DuVal attributes the emerging decentralized power structures of eighteenth century to the Mississippian decline.

The supreme authority of the French Crown and empire would have left the Mandan and Assiniboine unimpressed, they “had come to disapprove of accumulating wealth and valued giving more than receiving.”²⁰⁰ Therefore, Onontio’s benevolence and generosity would once again be a cornerstone to courting Indigenous allies on the native ground, just as it had been in the *pays d’en haut*. The only difference being that outside of the Great Lakes Basin it was logistically much more difficult for the French to move supplies inland.

The decentralized power structures of the Mandan were evident when the French and Assiniboine finally arrived at the Mandan rendezvous in late November 1738. When the French met the first Mandan chief, he “begged me [La Vérendrye] to stay at his fort, which was the nearest, a smaller one than the others but well stocked with provisions.”²⁰¹ La Vérendrye was disappointed with the appearance of the Mandan. Dismayed, he wrote, “I confess I was greatly surprised, as I expected to see people quite different from the other savages according to the stories that had been told us. They do not differ from the Assiniboine, being naked except for a garment of buffalo skin carelessly worn without any breechcloths.”²⁰² Perhaps, on account of this disappointment, La Vérendrye seems to have convinced himself that there was something inherently “white” about the Mandan. Later, La Vérendrye wrote that the Mandan “tribe is of mixed blood, white and black. The women are rather handsome, particularly the light-coloured ones; they have an abundance of fair hair.”²⁰³ La Vérendrye also admired their forts and architecture, noting that there is “nothing savage” about the Mandan’s forts, which were in fact

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 70.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ La Vérendrye, *Journal in the form of a letter (1738-1739)*, 320.

²⁰² Ibid, 319.

²⁰³ Ibid, 340.

“impregnable to savages.”²⁰⁴ Initially disappointed, La Vérendrye seems to have later convinced himself, and hopefully his superiors, that the trip was worthwhile and that indeed the Mandan were quite different from the “other savages.”

On his return journey to Fort La Reine, La Vérendrye came upon an Assiniboine camp and reproached the Assiniboine for having lied to him about the “whiteness” of the Mandan. He complained to them that “all that they had told me I had found very little that was true.”²⁰⁵ La Vérendrye was himself reproached by one of the Assiniboine warriors who “rose above the others” and declared:

I am the man best able to talk to you about this. You did not rightly understand what was said to you. I don't tell any lies. Last summer I killed one [of that nation] who was covered with iron as I have already said several times. If I had not killed his horse first I should not have got the man.²⁰⁶

La Vérendrye doubted the veracity of the story and demanded proof: “what did you take from his body to let us see that you are speaking the truth?”²⁰⁷ La Vérendrye knew that trophy taking of defeated enemies was common practice in Assiniboine culture.²⁰⁸ The Assiniboine warrior admitted that, as he was about to “cut off his head [scalp],” he saw “some men on horseback who were intercepting my retreat, and I had much difficulty in escaping.”²⁰⁹ The whole Assiniboine council argued that they had not meant the Mandan when they spoke of the nation who “sang like the French,” but rather they meant a “nation that dwells down the river and that works in iron.”²¹⁰

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 354.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ For a more in depth analysis of North American indigenous “trophy taking,” see Richard J. Chacon and David H. Dye, *The Taking and Displaying of Human Body Parts as Trophies by Amerindians* (New York: Springer, 2007).

²⁰⁹ La Vérendrye, *Journal in the form of a letter (1738-1739)*, 354.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

The Assiniboine were probably referring to the Spanish borderland settlements in New Mexico and Texas.²¹¹ The borderland settlements were the economic backwaters of the Spanish Empire. In the eighteenth century, New Mexico and Texas functioned in the same way that New France did for the French Crown, to check the ambitions of their imperial rivals. Canada, the *pays d'en haut*, the Illinois Country, and Louisiana were all instruments in French imperial policy, directed to contain England on the eastern seaboard.²¹² Similarly, La Vérendrye's explorations were meant to consolidate the French Crown's hold on the interior and to contain the English on Hudson Bay. La Vérendrye, however, was never entirely successful at preventing the Cree and Assiniboine from trading at the HBC posts.

On the native ground, European sovereignty was claimed by "piggy-backing on Indians' sovereignty" or territorial claims through the formation of an alliance.²¹³ Therefore, European imperialists were not claiming sovereignty of a land over indigenous people, rather over their imperial rivals. In 1743, Louis-Joseph de la Vérendrye buried a lead tablet "with the arms and inscription of the King" in South Dakota, which he covered in stones. He therefore claimed sovereignty over these territories of the Mandan and Hidatsa for the French Crown.

Louis-Joseph remarked that he "said to the savages, who did not know about the tablet of lead that I had put in the ground, that I was erecting these stones in memory of the fact that we had come upon their land."²¹⁴ The lead tablet was meant to deter European rivals and not the Mandan and Hidatsa who were not even aware of the true purpose of its existence. The French seemed to have realistic expectations of what sovereignty equated outside of the *pays d'en haut*.

²¹¹ For a more detailed analysis of the Spanish borderland settlements, see James F. Brooks, *Captives & Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992).

²¹² Eccles, *La Mer de l'Ouest*, 97-98.

²¹³ DuVal, *The Native Ground*, 8.

²¹⁴ Chevalier de la Vérendrye, *Journal of the Expedition (1742-1743)*, 427.

Although imperial sovereignty was claimed by “piggybacking” on indigenous sovereignty and territory, La Vérendrye had difficulty in compelling the Cree and Assiniboine to be either “entirely French or entirely English.”²¹⁵ If the Cree and Assiniboine were trade partners, allies, and kinsmen with both the HBC traders and the French at the western posts, La Vérendrye would be unable to claim complete sovereignty for the French Crown in the Northwest. As late as 1738, La Vérendrye was still lecturing, scolding, and pleading with the Cree and Assiniboine not to trade with the English on Hudson Bay. Near the present-day site of Winnipeg in 1738, La Vérendrye met with two Cree chiefs to chastise them for having traded at the HBC post, York Factory. Making matters worse, La Vérendrye learned that one of the chiefs had even “received a collar from the English together with a present as an inducement to do some bad turn [*pour jouer un mauvais tour*] to the French.”²¹⁶ The Cree chief seems to have defended the English by assuring La Vérendrye that “the Englishman is quiet and does not talk [ill] of the Frenchmen.”²¹⁷ French sovereignty was far from guaranteed from their alliance with the Cree and Assiniboine.

Despite Champagne’s assertion that La Vérendrye “gave an empire to France,” the French western posts in the *Petit Nord* and Northern Great Plains seem to have been tenuously held outposts of empire. Indeed, the reality of the French in the *Petit Nord* and Northern Great Plains is closer to Eccles’s observation that by “the end of the regime the French had only a handful of men at a few scattered trading posts.”²¹⁸ The Cree and Assiniboine were autonomous historical agents and acted out of their own interests on the native ground. The French were tenuously incorporated into their world into pre-existing cultural and societal categories. Despite

²¹⁵ La Vérendrye, Report in Journal form (1733-1734), 171.

²¹⁶ La Vérendrye, Journal in the form of a letter (1738-1739), 299.

²¹⁷ *Ibid*, 300.

²¹⁸ Eccles, Review of Les La Vérendrye et le Poste de l’Ouest by Antoine Champagne, 171.

Cree and Assiniboine autonomy, the French penetration into the *Petit Nord* would have inadvertent shattering and transformative impact on Cree, Monsoni, Assiniboine, and Dakota societies.

Chapter III

The *Petit Nord* “Shatter Zone”: Disease Epidemics and the Commercialization of Slavery

In the last two chapters, I argued that La Vérendrye, the mouthpiece and representative of Onontio, attempted to use mediation as an instrument of power in the *Petit Nord* and Northern Great Plains. La Vérendrye sought to control inter-village patterns of warfare through the imposition of a general French-mediated peace strategy, the *Pax Gallica*. According to Havard, the strategy of *Pax Gallica* was used as a “peace-war” by the French colonial government to extend forms of domination over Indigenous nations in North America. Unlike in the *pays d’en haut*, where the various Algonquian-speaking peoples had been weakened – embattled by warfare and ravaged by epidemic diseases – the Cree, Assiniboine, and Dakota were cohesive and politically autonomous. Therefore, the Indigenous peoples of the *Petit Nord* and Northern Great Plains refused to submit to the *Pax Gallica*, or to acknowledge La Vérendrye as the mediator and arbiter of the French alliance. This is not to say that the Cree and Assiniboine rejected the friendship of the French; rather, they welcomed La Vérendrye and his *voyageurs* and agreed to incorporate them into pre-existing societal and cultural categories on the native ground. Nevertheless, the penetration of French newcomers would have transformative and cataclysmic consequences on the Cree, Assiniboine, and Dakota societies of *Petit Nord* and Northern Great Plains.

Two factors will frame my analysis of the devastation wrought on these Indigenous societies of *Petit Nord* in the mid-eighteenth century. First, the epidemic diseases that the French carried along the rivers and lakes of the *Petit Nord* devastated the Indigenous population. Second, the establishment of La Vérendrye’s western posts linked the *Petit Nord* to an

international market and provided a new commercial outlet for slavery. The commercialization of slavery, the establishment of disease pools, and the availability of European firearms created a competitive environment of intensified warfare in the *Petit Nord*.

Before La Vérendrye's arrival, the military alliances in the *Petit Nord* and Northern Great Plains were fluctuating. Perhaps the most significant change was the Assiniboine breaking away from the Dakota. In spite of the language barrier, the Siouan-speaking Assiniboine formed an alliance with the Algonquian-speaking Cree. The Assiniboine breakaway was probably caused by the increased economic opportunities presented by the newly arrived English traders on Hudson Bay.²¹⁹ Arthur J. Ray suggests that "the Assiniboine then may very well have allied themselves to the Cree, as the Indians suggested, because of the growing military superiority that the latter group gained as a consequence of their more reliable supply of goods."²²⁰ Assiniboine-Dakota hostilities seem to have been correlated with the English intrusion in the Bay, although the Assiniboine seem to have also existed as a distinct group before the eighteenth century.²²¹

The arrival of the French must have surely convinced the Assiniboine that they had made the right choice in allying themselves with the Cree. The Cree and Assiniboine alliance had previously waged war against the Mandan, but in the early 1730s, they seem to have brokered a peace with the peoples of the Missouri River Valley, further alienating the Dakota from the Plains commercial system.²²² European international markets seem to have been an inducer of violence in the heart of North America. Access to European goods gave their trade partners a distinct advantage over their less well-equipped neighbours.

²¹⁹ Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*, 5-6.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² Dale Miquelon, *New France 1701-1744: A Supplement to Europe* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987), 183.

In his official report of the 1736 Lake of the Woods massacre, Beauharnois gave a grisly description of the deaths of the twenty-one Frenchmen, in particular of the two most prominent men in the canoe convoy:

The heads were placed on beaver robes, most of them scalped; the missionary had one knee on the ground, an arrow in his side, his breast split open... The Sieur [Jean-Baptiste] de la Vérendrye was lying on his face, his back all scored with knife cuts, a stake thrust into his side, headless, his body ornamented with leggings and arm pieces of porcupine.²²³

Beauharnois concluded that “the Sioux in general are the most ferocious of all the savages; they are continually at war with the Cree and the Assiniboine... they are irreconcilable enemies.”²²⁴

La Vérendrye’s western posts intensified and redirected violence between the various Indigenous groups in the *Petit Nord*. The Cree and Assiniboine began raiding the Dakota not only to acquire the valuable commodity of war captives, but also to subvert the French attempts of forming an alliance with the Dakota. For their part, the Dakota feared French expansion, and were aggrieved by the amount of weaponry, munitions, and powder that La Vérendrye was placing directly into the hands of their sworn enemies. As Gary Clayton Anderson has observed, “the French seemed oblivious to the impact their growing commercial system was having on intertribal relations.”²²⁵

Warfare between the Cree and Dakota certainly existed in the pre-contact period, but the French presence in the *Petit Nord* intensified inter-village hostilities. In pre-contact North America, Wayne E. Lee has argued that an “endemic state of war... [was] thoroughly entwined within Indian societies.” There were, however, “structural and cultural limitations on the scale and devastation of warfare.”²²⁶ Douglas B. Bamforth has argued that “tribal peoples may have exhibited one form or another of low-casualty, largely ritualized, intergroup conflict, but lacked

²²³ Beauharnois, “Affair of the murder of twenty-one voyageurs at the Lakes of the Woods, in the month of June 1736,” in *Journals and Letters*, ed. and trans. Lawrence J. Burpee, 263-264.

²²⁴ *Ibid*, 265.

²²⁵ Anderson, *Kinsmen of Another Kind*, 42-43.

²²⁶ Wayne E. Lee, “Peace Chiefs and Blood Revenge: Patterns of Restraint in Native American Warfare, 1500-1800,” *Journal of Military History*, 71 (2007), 702.

systematic aggression intended to capture land or destroy enemy populations.”²²⁷ Indigenous societies were demographically limited in the number of young warriors that could be mobilized. In turn, a smaller war party could inflict only limited destruction. Moreover, high levels of casualties generally deemed that the war party had been unsuccessful: “a victory bought with blood is no victory.”²²⁸ Observing the cautious nature of Indigenous warfare, an early Jesuit missionary even remarked that “Indians wage war to kill and not to be killed themselves... they say that to expose themselves openly is to be killed which is not intelligent.”²²⁹

In this final chapter, I will employ Robbie Ethridge’s “shatter zone” theory as a framework in mapping the increased violence and slavery that permeated throughout the Indigenous peoples of the *Petit Nord* and Northern Great Plains in the eighteenth century. Ethridge’s “shatter zone” framework was originally produced to understand the collapse of the “Mississippian world” through the use of a “multicausal model.” Ethridge argues that the multicausal model allows scholars to examine forces of the collapse other than disease, “in particular the commercial trade in Indian slaves – and it argues that one must also consider the interplay between trade, disease, warfare, and slavery.”²³⁰

The rise of militaristic slaving societies, increase in intra-Indian conflict, and the influence of the global commercial power funnelled through European outposts are all aspects in the multicausal model of collapse propagated by the “shatter zone.”²³¹ “In addition to the colonizers’ violence,” Ethridge argues, “indigenous people who lived and participated in the

²²⁷ Douglas B. Bamforth, “Indigenous People, Indigenous Violence: Precontact Warfare on the North American Great Plains,” *Man*, 1 (1994), 96.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

²²⁹ Father Antoine Silvy, *Letters from North America*, trans. Ivy Alice Dickson (Belleville: Mika Publishing Company, 1980), 131.

²³⁰ Robbie Ethridge, “Introduction: Mapping the Mississippian Shatter Zone,” in *Mapping the Mississippian Shatter Zone: The Colonial Indian Slave Trade and Regional Instability in the American South*, ed. Robbie Ethridge and Sheri M. Shuck-Hall (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 12.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

colonial world also contributed to and sometimes created colonial violence.”²³² In a sense, “Indian slaving was one of the hammers that shattered the world in which they themselves existed.”²³³ Therefore, I will employ the “shatter zone” as a very useful theory to understand and analyse the world of violence and slavery instigated by La Vérendrye and the HBC traders in the *Petit Nord* and Northern Great Plains.

In pre-contact North America, Indigenous people engaged in endemic warfare, but on a limited scale. As a result, they also practiced captive taking and adoption of war captives on a small, but endemic rate. Beginning in the pre-contact period, the exchange of captives, or slaves, was a symbolically more powerful gesture than the exchange of furs and pelts. Ultimately, the enslavement of Indigenous people was a symbolic device used by French and natives to both consolidate and define the parameters of the alliance on the middle ground of the *pays d'en haut*. Historian E.A. S. Demers has argued that although the European enslavement and exchange of native people was heavily influenced by the “Native-American constructions of captivity and slavery. These Native-American constructions in turn grew out of interactions within a culturally diverse middle ground.”²³⁴ Initially, the Cree and Assiniboine exchanged captives to consolidate their friendship with the French newcomers. For La Vérendrye and his merchant associates, the acquisition of Indigenous slaves meant the opening of a new and lucrative market for the colony, which suffered from a monocultural economic dependence on the fur trade. Despite its importance to defining the parameters of the French-Indigenous alliance, a discussion of the slave trade has been largely omitted or dismissed from the La Vérendrye historiography. As Eccles has noted, La Vérendrye’s “role in the western slave trade is glossed over.”²³⁵

²³² Ibid, 21.

²³³ Ibid, 26.

²³⁴ Demers, *Native-American Slavery and Territoriality*, 164.

²³⁵ Eccles, *Review of Les La Vérendrye et le Poste de l'Ouest*, 171.

Eccles has argued that during the years of La Vérendrye's expedition for the Western Sea, "the trade in Indian slaves at the western posts became a sizable item, up to sixty a year being shipped to Montréal."²³⁶ Indeed, La Vérendrye's own *Journals and Letters* attest to the scope of the slave trade. La Vérendrye boasted about the great profits procured by his enterprises in the West: "of the persons to whom this enterprise means a living, of the slaves that are obtained for the country, and the furs of which formerly the English got the benefit."²³⁷ Eccles has also contended that the Cree and Assiniboine were particularly successful and prolific slave traders, "Indian slaves, up to sixty a year by the mid-eighteenth century, were purchased from the Crees and Assiniboines at Michilimackinac."²³⁸ La Vérendrye's commercialization of slavery provided an economic outlet for the Cree and Assiniboine, who were already very active in wars of capture.

Before the arrival of the French in the *Petit Nord*, Indigenous peoples already practiced ritualised capture in warfare, torture, and adoption ceremonies.²³⁹ For example, in the Cree-Inuit context, Charles A. Bishop and Victor P. Lytwyn argue: "Raiding was also done to take captives. Women were sometimes taken as wives... and children were adopted, perhaps to fill a void following the death of a Cree child. Some captives were purchased by the HBC, often to prevent them from being killed by the Cree."²⁴⁰ In the pre-contact period, the Assiniboine and Cree seem to have warred against the Mandan and Hidatsa nations of the Missouri River Valley, and from

²³⁶ W.J. Eccles, *The Canadian Frontier 1534-1760* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969), 149.

²³⁷ La Vérendrye, *Report of la Vérendrye (1744)*, 451-452.

²³⁸ W.J. Eccles, *The French in North America 1500-1783* (Markham: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1998), 86. It is unclear, however, if Eccles meant that the Cree and Assiniboine were journeying all the way to Michilimackinac themselves to sell the slaves, or if slaves, originally captured by the Cree and Assiniboine, were being brought to Michilimackinac by the French to be traded. The latter seems more likely.

²³⁹ See for example, Daniel P. Barr, *Unconquered: The Iroquois League at War in Colonial America* (Westport: Praeger, 2006), 13; Martin Fournier, *Pierre-Esprit Radisson* (Sillery: Septentrion, 2002), 35; Charles A. Bishop and Victor P. Lytwyn, "Barbarism and Ardour of War from the Tenderest Years: Cree-Inuit Warfare in the Hudson Bay Region," in *North American Indigenous Warfare and Ritual Violence*, ed. Richard J. Chacon and Rubén G. Mendoza (Tucson: the University of Arizona Press, 2007), 50-51.

²⁴⁰ Bishop, *Cree-Inuit Warfare*, 50-51.

them procured a number of slaves. In a 1733 report, Beauharnois wrote: “The Cree and the Assiniboine have constantly made war upon them and have captured several children from them.”²⁴¹ According to the report, some of these Mandan children were purchased by La Vérendrye’s nephew, the Sieur de la Jemeraye, who brought them with him when he returned to Montreal at the end of the summer of 1733.

Brett Rushforth has argued that the French-Indian slave trade was derived from the Indigenous customs of forging friendships and alliances, “allied Indians offered captives to French colonists as culturally powerful symbols of their emerging partnership.”²⁴² Captives were symbolically powerful gifts because they signified the opposite of warfare, “the giving rather than the taking of life.”²⁴³ Therefore, the slave trade became a symbolically viable exchange in the consolidation of the alliance. However, starting in the early eighteenth century, western traders, prominent merchants, minor colonial officials, and even the Governor-General Philippe de Rigaud Vaudreuil began to acquire Indian slaves.²⁴⁴ These slaves, originally exchanged as a symbolic representation of flesh and life, were purchased by various traders and urbanites in Montreal and Quebec for both labour and domestic work.²⁴⁵

The marketability of native slaves altered the symbolic practice of captive exchanges. Rushforth argues, “As French colonists demanded a growing number of Indian slaves from their allies, Native American captive customs also evolved to meet the new realities of New France’s slave market.”²⁴⁶ The meanings of the wars of capture and captive-taking were adjusted to suit the demands of the slave market. Captives were now seen as commodities of trade rather than

²⁴¹ Beauharnois, “Report of Beauharnois (1733),” in *Journals and Letters*, ed. and trans. Lawrence J. Burpee, 108.

²⁴² Brett Rushforth, “‘A Little Flesh We Offer You’: The Origins of Indian Slavery in New France,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 60 (2003), 779.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 785.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 798.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁶ Rushforth, “A Little Flesh We Offer You,” 808.

symbols of life and alliance, “this caused rituals of humiliation and torture to decline because the resulting injuries diminished a captive’s value.”²⁴⁷ The interests of the French and Indigenous participants compromised and accommodated each other on the middle ground. The Cree and Assiniboine would use slavery to define the parameters of the alliance.

The Cree and Assiniboine were able to manipulate the slave market to define their own position within Onontio’s family. Similarly, in his analysis of the Fox Wars, Rushforth argues that the Algonquians defined the beginning and the ending of the Fox Wars through the use of captive taking. By manipulating the slave trade, the Onontio’s children created a wedge between the French and the Fox which inevitably led to war. These allies of New France – the Illinois, Ottawas, Ojibwa, Miami, and Wendat, to name a few – despised the Fox and denied French control and defined the parameters of the alliance.²⁴⁸ By taking Fox captives in war, and giving them as gifts to Onontio, the Great Lakes nations were effectively making reconciliation between the Fox and the French-Algonquian alliance impossible.

The slave trade was the point of contention, the catalyst for war with the alliance or peace and incorporation into the alliance, as far as the Fox were concerned. Over and over again, the Fox demanded their enslaved kin released from bondage and returned to them.²⁴⁹ The Governor-General even wrote that “it is [unnatural] to think that peace can be made with people whose children we are withholding.”²⁵⁰ The divide deepened as the allies continued to attack Fox villages, and therefore continued to trade or gift Fox slaves to French offices as symbols of amity and alliance.²⁵¹ Rushforth argues that the “Indians’ use of intervillage violence” was a tactical

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Brett Rushforth, “Slavery, the Fox Wars, and the Limits of Alliance,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 63 (2006), 61.

²⁴⁹ Ibid, 72.

²⁵⁰ Ibid, 65.

²⁵¹ Ibid, 70.

ploy to limit, control, and direct France's commercial and territorial ambitions in North America.²⁵²

Similarly, the Cree and Assiniboine were able to employ slavery as a device to isolate the French from any sort of reconciliation or rapprochement with the Dakota. This tactic was especially evident in 1741, when the Cree, Monsoni, and Assiniboine converged upon Dakota territory and made a war, capturing a "number of slaves so great that, according to the report and the expressions of the savages, they occupied in their march more than four arpents."²⁵³ In his report, Beauharnois wrote that because of the war, "that there will be more slaves than packages."²⁵⁴ Certainly, the Dakota would have been unwilling or unable to become one of Onontio's children with the knowledge that he held a great number of their own kin as slaves. Although La Vérendrye benefited economically from the slave trade, he was unable to define the contentious parameters of Onontio's family in the *Petit Nord*.

In his recently published book, *Bonds of Alliance*, Rushforth has argued that La Vérendrye's support of Indigenous slavery destroyed the Dakota trust in the French and ultimately led to a dangerous instability in the *Petit Nord*.²⁵⁵ La Vérendrye saw the support of the anti-Dakota violence as means of fulfilling the strategy of *Pax Gallica*, but he must have also seen the violence and redistribution of captives as a means of decreasing his daunting debt of fifty thousand *livres*. As Rushforth notes, La Vérendrye "must have thought of the financial returns of turning Sioux war captives into French slaves."²⁵⁶ La Vérendrye's insatiable and

²⁵² Ibid, 77.

²⁵³ Beauharnois, "Beauharnois to Maurepas (1742)," in *Journals and Letters*, ed. and trans. Lawrence J. Burpee, 380-381.

²⁵⁴ Ibid, 381.

²⁵⁵ Brett Rushforth, *Bonds of Alliance: Indigenous and Atlantic Slavery in New France* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 229.

²⁵⁶ Ibid, 230.

contradictory demand for slaves “undermined an alliance that would have drawn colonial settlement and trade deep onto the North American Plains.”²⁵⁷

Similar to the strategies employed by the Algonquians of the *pays d'en haut* during the Fox Wars, the Cree and Assiniboine would attempt to “block” the French alliance with the Dakota. Already, the Dakota had been excluded from the 1701 Great Peace of Montreal, the French had wanted to include them, but the Algonquian allies refused.²⁵⁸ Forty years later, the French were still attempting to include the Dakota in the French alliance, once again much to the chagrin of the Cree and Assiniboine. They wished to put a wedge between the French traders and the Dakota, and thereby reduce the quantity of manufactured goods that their enemies would be able to use against them.²⁵⁹ Rushforth argues that through the exchange of war captives for European goods and firearms, the Cree and Assiniboine alliance “manoeuvred the French into supporting anti-Sioux slave raids.”²⁶⁰ These raids not only severed the French alliance with the Dakota, but also secured valuable goods and firearms for the Cree and Assiniboine villages.²⁶¹

Rushforth observes that “La Vérendrye never acknowledged his own culpability” in the slave trade, nor does it seem that he ever stopped selling Indigenous slaves at Michilimackinac.²⁶² Beauharnois recognized that the purchasing of Dakota slaves from the Assiniboine and Cree was imperilling the lives of Frenchmen in the *Petit Nord*, and had likely played a role in the 1736 Lake of the Woods massacre. Following the massacre, Beauharnois rushed orders to Michilimackinac, forbidding the purchasing of any Dakota captives:

²⁵⁷ Ibid, 237.

²⁵⁸ Havard, *The Great Peace of Montreal*, 123.

²⁵⁹ Rushforth, *Bonds of Alliance*, 232.

²⁶⁰ Ibid, 237.

²⁶¹ Ibid, 232-233.

²⁶² Ibid, 232.

You will positively forbid, sir, all the Frenchmen of Your post to buy any Indian slave from the Assiniboins, it being of Infinite consequence for the colony to prevent this trade. Thus I order you to see it consistently that does not happen, and in case you learn that there might be several at your post, you will make the decision that you Deem the most appropriate for having them sent back to Their home.²⁶³

La Vérendrye's slave trade provided a lucrative alternative for the impoverished explorer, but threatened the very stability of the region. Richard Weyhing has argued that the presence of French imperial agents "amplified" pre-existing patterns of Indigenous warfare. Weyhing argues that the French immersion in Indigenous villages and communities represented a dramatic amplification of traditional modes of inter-village warfare brought on by the arrival of European diseases and trade goods during the preceding decades."²⁶⁴

The amplification of warfare was indicative of the shatter zone framework, wherein militaristic slaving societies emerged around the edges of a European international markets, or world-systems. Denys Delâge defines a world-system as "a huge socio-economic entity that covers and integrates regions, countries, continents, and empires, and one that functions according to the exigencies of an economic conjuncture common to all parties."²⁶⁵ A world-system is characterized by the international division of labour, where a central core power monopolizes finance, commerce, and manufacturing, and where outlying and primitive peripheries supply raw materials.²⁶⁶ Naturally, the European central core controlled capital and exploited the primitive and rural peripheral regions of the world-system. The emergence or expansion of world-systems, in addition to epidemic diseases, created these "shatter zones" in North America.

²⁶³ Beauharnois to Saint-Pierre, Aug. 28, 1736, in Joseph L. Peyser, ed. and trans., *Jacques Legardeur de Saint-Pierre: Officer, Gentleman, Entrepreneur* (East Lansing, Mich., 1996), 34-35, Quoted in Brett Rushforth, "Bonds of Alliance," 232.

²⁶⁴ Richard Weyhing, "Le Sueur in the Sioux country: rethinking France's Indian alliance in the Pays d'en Haut," *Atlantic Studies* 10 (2013), 36.

²⁶⁵ Denys Delâge, *Bitter Feast: Amerindians and Europeans in Northeastern North America, 1600-64* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1993), 3-4.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

Ethridge argues that a “new kind of slaving, requiring a new kind of occupation was created on the edge of the modern world-system.”²⁶⁷ The western posts in the *Petit Nord* and Northern Great Plains promoted inter-village raiding and captive taking. The global commercial power of the French empire was funnelled through these minor outposts in the *Petit Nord* and Northern Great Plains.²⁶⁸ The Assiniboine and Cree became tied to the world-system through these commercial western posts. On the global periphery of empire, the European core countries extracted labour and resources from the New World. Moreover, intra-Indian conflict rose and violence permeated on edge of this world-system.²⁶⁹

Ethridge notes that scholars have often explained intra-Indian conflicts as “long-lived cultural attributes such as ancient animosities, status and prestige seeking, fierceness and bravery, or functionalist explanations such as competition over natural resources.”²⁷⁰ Although warfare and captive taking certainly existed in the pre-contact period, the commercialization of the slave trade saw an intensification of violence and warfare. As warfare and commercial interests intertwined, mechanisms for mitigating warfare and brokering peace dissipated, “meaning that as Indian commercial interests intensified, so did the warfare and the militarization of those native groups who sought to control the trade.”²⁷¹

Similarly, Daniel Richter has described the fur trading peripheries of New France as “a world of constant violence,” where “no one could live without secure access to metal, cloth, and especially, the tools of war.”²⁷² Weyhing has suggested that inter-village violence was instigated by “Onontio’s duplicity,” who supported the enslavement of the Dakota by the Assiniboine and

²⁶⁷ Ethridge, *Shatter Zone*, 26.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 18-19.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 19.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 20.

²⁷¹ *Ibid*, 24.

²⁷² Daniel K. Richter, *Before the Revolution: America's Ancient Pasts* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 147.

the Cree, all his supposed children. Weyhing suggests, “the agents of Onontio had come to endanger, rather than protect, their communities.”²⁷³ The Assiniboine and Cree were also angered that the Dakota had also been designated as the children of Onontio; they complained that they had “become bastards at the expense of the Sioux, who were now his favoured ‘children’ and who assailed them with French arms.”²⁷⁴

Although the French promoted warfare indirectly through the establishment of world markets and the commercialization of slavery, there were instances where the French seem to have been even more forceful in prompting inter-village violence. For example, when La Vérendrye returned to Fort St. Charles in 1738, he learned that a French trader named Clément Leriger de La Plante, nicknamed “Le Canard” by the natives, had induced a war party to attack the Dakota to avenge the deaths of the massacred Frenchmen. La Vérendrye remarked that he began his speech “by blaming them for having gone to war contrary to the promise they had made last year.”²⁷⁵ The Cree chief replied: “My Father, do not be angry with us. It was against our will that war parties were raised. It was Le Canard who wanted it really, speaking in the name of our Father and handing out fine presents.”²⁷⁶ Le Canard claimed to be speaking on Onontio’s behalf and urged the natives to war. Le Canard, a trader himself, seems to have used the Lake of the Woods massacre as a pretext to induce the party to war, and to acquire captives.

La Vérendrye himself even came close to responding violently against the Dakota in retaliation for his son’s murder in 1736. Beauharnois wrote that the “Sieur de la Vérendrye smitten with grief at the death of his son, he was thinking of putting himself at the head of the

²⁷³ Weyhing, *Le Sueur in the Sioux country*, 44.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁷⁵ La Vérendrye, *Journal in the form of a letter (1738-1739)*, 291.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

Cree and the Assiniboine and marching against the Sioux.”²⁷⁷ In his report, Beauharnois suggested to Versailles that a war of retaliation was “an extreme and very unsuitable course to take.”²⁷⁸ If La Vérendrye chose to pursue such a course of action, Beauharnois wrote that it would be “more fitting to abandon the posts of the Western Sea, or to send another office there to relieve the Sieur de la Vérendrye, one who would strive to reconcile all the tribes.”²⁷⁹

La Vérendrye was being urged to make war against the Dakota by his Cree, Monsoni, and Assiniboine allies. On September 3 1738, for example, La Colle once again implored the French to avenge the Lake of the Woods massacre. La Colle said: “he did not cease to weep for my son [Jean-Baptiste] and all the Frenchmen, that the lake was still red with their blood, which cried for vengeance, a vengeance that he had never been able to wreak as he would have wished.”²⁸⁰ Cree chiefs as far west as the Forks of the Red and Assiniboine rivers urged La Vérendrye to vengeance. One Cree chief spoke on behalf of his people, “Our heart is still sore on account of your son, who was the first come and build a fort on our land; we loved him deeply.”²⁸¹ In the shatter zone framework, the Cree and Assiniboine were using warfare against the Dakota as a tool of societal regeneration and growth.

In the shatter zone, Matthew H. Jennings argues, “Indians used this violence as a tool of regeneration.”²⁸² Indigenous people had a profound impact on the reshaping of their shattered world. As Jennings notes, “paradoxically, violence can be generative as well as a destructive force.”²⁸³ Indeed, “Violence functioned as a social glue...Indian nations began to coalesce in the

²⁷⁷ Ibid, 266.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Ibid, 295.

²⁸¹ Ibid, 300.

²⁸² Matthew H. Jennings, “Violence in a Shattered World,” in *Mapping the Mississippian Shatter Zone: The Colonial Indian Slave Trade and Regional Instability in the American South*, ed. Robbie Ethridge and Sheri M. Shuck-Hall (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 287.

²⁸³ Ibid.

crucible of this violence.”²⁸⁴ The societal regeneration and the individual status advancement that could be procured through warfare, as well as the economic benefits to be obtained through the sale of war captives, encouraged the Cree and Assiniboine to use the massacre of the twenty-one Frenchmen as a cause for a French sanctioned and supported war against the Dakota.

Examining the Beaver Wars of the seventeenth century, William A. Starna and José António Brandão have argued that recent scholarship has cast doubt on economic explanation for the warfare waged by the Haudenosaunee “to wrest control of the fur trade from the Hurons [Wendat], the northern Algonquians, and their French allies.”²⁸⁵ Recent scholarship has moved to expand and incorporate other important cultural factors such as the need of the Haudenosaunee to replace people lost to warfare and disease.²⁸⁶ Therefore, wars of capture due to disease epidemics must also be taken into consideration when examining the amplification of warfare in the *Petit Nord* and the Northern Great Plains.

Paul Hackett has argued that the “influx of White traders into the Petit Nord carried the potential for the introduction of epidemic disease. The rapidly moving brigades annually penetrating into the Petit Nord from the active disease centres of the eastern seaboard must have carried acute infectious disease with them on occasion.”²⁸⁷ The establishment of European trading posts in the interior acted as “nodes of diffusion” for “disease redistribution.”²⁸⁸ The French newcomers, however, did not create nodes of contact between Indigenous peoples.

²⁸⁴ Ibid, 287-288.

²⁸⁵ William A. Starna and José António Brandão, “From the Mohawk-Mahican war to the Beaver Wars: Questioning the Pattern,” *Ethnohistory* 51 (2004), 725.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Paul Hackett, *A Very Remarkable Sickness: Epidemic in the Petit Nord, 1670 to 1846* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2002), 43.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

Rather, as Havard suggests, the French established themselves amongst, or at least near, already established Indigenous villages or meeting points.²⁸⁹

On March 4 and 5, 1737, La Vérendrye held a general meeting at Fort Maurepas, on the Red River, with several Cree and Assiniboine bands. The impetus for the Council of Maurepas was La Vérendrye's desire to prevent retaliatory strikes against the Dakota for the 1736 Lake of the Woods massacre. Hackett notes that, unbeknownst to those in attendance, "some of the people present at the meeting were already infected with smallpox, and the disease began to manifest among two of the attending groups shortly after the talks were concluded."²⁹⁰

On May 26, La Vérendrye learned of the calamity at Fort Maurepas: "On the 26th Barrier Cree arrived and told me that the Winnipeg Cree whom I had left at fort Maurepas had all died of small-pox, which had been brought to them by those who had gone to trade with the English."²⁹¹ La Vérendrye did not hesitate to take the opportunity of the smallpox epidemic to further his own imperial agenda, he wrote: "I did not fail to tell them that the Master of Life had punished them for not having come to fort St. Charles as they had promised."²⁹² The following day, La Vérendrye learned that his longstanding ally, the Monsoni chief La Colle, had lost his daughter, possibly to the smallpox outbreak. La Vérendrye wrote that "La Colle sent me word... that having lost his daughter, he had not been able to come see me as he had promised, but that he was leaving at the head of three hundred men to go against the Sioux."²⁹³ La Colle's short message to La Vérendrye embodies the cycle of violence inherent in the shatter zone – population loss caused by the smallpox epidemic resulted in the amplification of pre-existing patterns of warfare.

²⁸⁹ Havard, *The Great Peace of Montreal of 1701*, 40.

²⁹⁰ Hackett, *A Very Remarkable Sickness*, 68.

²⁹¹ La Vérendrye, *Report of the Sieur de la Vérendrye (1736-1737)*, 256-257.

²⁹² *Ibid*, 257.

²⁹³ *Ibid*.

“Faced with the devastating impact of a virgin soil epidemic,” Hackett argues, “Aboriginal groups were often forced to adopt new strategies for survival... some found it necessary to replenish their numbers through warfare.”²⁹⁴ Hackett proposes that the Monsoni adopted and pursued the same strategy as the Haudenosaunee had in the Beaver Wars, “the Monsoni, under their prominent chief La Colle, again went to war against the Sioux of the Prairie, and took back a large number of their enemy as slaves.”²⁹⁵ Therefore, the calamity of epidemic diseases and the establishment of commercial slave markets both amplified Indigenous inter-village warfare.

Hackett argues that the origins of 1737-38 smallpox epidemic that struck the Cree and Monsoni lay in the urban disease pools of Europe, and was transmitted by sea to one of the rapidly expanding European communities along the Atlantic seaboard. The smallpox epidemic spread into the interior of the continent largely through Indigenous movement and communication patterns.²⁹⁶ Although the disease had been carried into the interior by Aboriginal movement patterns, and not by La Vérendrye’s canoe brigades, the French still facilitated the diffusion of the smallpox epidemic. For example, La Vérendrye assembled Cree, Monsoni, and Assiniboine bands from all over the *Petit Nord* and Northern Great Plains for the Council of Maurepas in March 1737. Following the Council of Maurepas, the smallpox epidemic devastatingly diffused to all corners of the *Petit Nord* and Northern Great Plains. Although La Vérendrye had not directly carried the disease into the interior with his canoe brigades, he facilitated the diffusion of the smallpox epidemic through the establishment of trading posts, which Hackett has described as “nodes of diffusion” for “disease redistribution.”²⁹⁷

²⁹⁴ Hackett, *A Very Remarkable Sickness*, 69.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 70.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 60.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 43.

Ethridge has argued that coalescence was “another response” to the realities of living in a world shattered by disease and warfare.²⁹⁸ Shatter zone theorists have demonstrated that marriage, adoption, and linguistic affiliations were all used “to glue disparate groups together.”²⁹⁹ Similarly, Hackett has argued that “the coalescence of the remnants of formerly autonomous peoples who had been ravaged by disease into a larger, combined, social group in order to surpass a population threshold, either for defensive or subsistence purposes, was one of the most frequently documented responses to severe mortality among Aboriginal groups in North America.”³⁰⁰

Following the dispersal of the Wendat people in the mid-seventeenth century, due to disease epidemics, Haudenosaunee violence, and starvation, they sought refuge with their long-term allies, the Anishinaabe. Kathryn Magee Labelle argues that “in terms of the Coalition, the dispersal only served to strengthen it... At this time more than ever the Wendat depended upon the alliance to ensure their survival; the Anishinaabeg were their first option for refuge, rejuvenation, and protection.”³⁰¹ Alliances and coalitions were survival strategies employed by Indigenous peoples, who had endured catastrophic events. Hackett also argues that the Monsoni, reduced in population by disease epidemics and endemic warfare with the Dakota, sought refuge with their Barrier Cree allies along the Winnipeg River. Although the Monsoni had once autonomously controlled the eastern Boundry Waters region, Rainy Lake in particular, by the 1740s their numbers had become so reduced that they were no distinction was made that referred to as an independent people, separate from the Cree.

²⁹⁸ Ethridge, *Mapping the Mississippian Shatter Zone*, 38.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁰ Hackett, *A Very Remarkable Sickness*, 70.

³⁰¹ Kathryn Magee Labelle, *Dispersed But Not Destroyed: A History of the Seventeenth-Century Wendat People* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013), 82.

Even as early as 1735, “Father Aulneau had identified the Winnipeg River as solely the domain of the Cristinaux, or Cree.”³⁰² Aulneau wrote to his superior Father Bonin that he was “among the Kristinaux [Cree]” at Fort St. Charles, and that the lands surrounding the fort are also “taken up by the Kristinaux, who occupy not only all the northern part as far as the sea, but all the immense stretch of country beginning at the Lake of the Woods and extending far beyond Lake Ouinipigon.”³⁰³ However, Aulneau did remark that “there were a certain number of Mousouis [Monsoni], neighbours of the Kristinaux, and not a few other Indians among those who dwell in the vicinity of the western extremity of Lake Superior.”³⁰⁴ The Monsoni still maintained a distinct identity, but were beginning to integrate with Cree villages due to their reduced population. The maintenance of a unique identity, language, customs, and culture lead to the emergence of “polyethnic villages.”³⁰⁵ Kathryn Labelle makes a similar argument about the Wendat Diaspora in *Dispersed But Not Destroyed*.

The Monsoni chief La Colle’s continued role as a prominent chief in the Monsoni, Cree, and Assiniboine alliance demonstrates that the Monsoni were, similar to the Wendat, also “Dispersed” by disease and warfare, “But Not Destroyed.” In 1736, La Vérendrye noted that “La Colle, [was the] principal chief of the Monsoni, and [is] in high repute also with the Cree and Assiniboine, acquired through his intelligence and his bravery.”³⁰⁶ In September 1738, La Colle spoke in council “replied for all the rest,” speaking for the two other Cree and Assiniboine chiefs – La Mikouenne and Lechenaiîl.³⁰⁷ Finally, in September 1742, Beauharnois wrote to Maurepas that La Colle “had formed in September a party of more than two hundred men, the majority of

³⁰² Hackett, *A Very Remarkable Sickness*, 70.

³⁰³ Father Jean-Pierre Aulneau, “Father Jean P. Aulneau to Father Bonin. Fort St. Charles, among the Kristinaux, April 30, 1736,” in *The Aulneau Collection* (Montreal: Archives of St. Mary’s College, 1893), 70, 73.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 75.

³⁰⁵ Hackett, *A Very Remarkable Sickness*, 70.

³⁰⁶ La Vérendrye, *Report of the Sieur de la Vérendrye (1736-1737)*223.

³⁰⁷ La Vérendrye, *Journal in the form of a letter (1738-1739)*, 294-295.

whom were Cree and Assiniboine.”³⁰⁸ Therefore, by 1742 the ethnically Monsoni chief La Colle was still a prominent leader in Cree and Assiniboine villages. By 1752-1753, however, the journal of Jacques Legardeur de Saint-Pierre, La Vérendrye’s successor from the western posts, leaves no historical record of the chief La Colle, or any remnants of the Monsoni nation. Saint-Pierre does note, however, that the “Crees... are the motivating force of all these continents [nations]... including the Assinibouels [Assiniboine]” in the *Petit Nord*.³⁰⁹ A decade following La Vérendrye’s explorations, the Monsoni had vanished from the colonial record, the remnants of their population most likely incorporated into Cree villages around the Lake of the Woods and the Winnipeg River.

The French presence in the in the *Petit Nord* had amplified the pre-existing patterns of Indigenous warfare and captive taking. The western posts not only connected the *Petit Nord* to the world-system of the French empire, but also acted as nodes of disease redistribution as seen in the Council of Maurepas in March 1737. The Cree and Assiniboine were tied to the world-system of the French empire, where France, the core country, plundered labour and resources in an unequal exchange from the primitive peripheral economy of the *Petit Nord*.³¹⁰ Violence permeated on edge of this world-system in an effort for Indigenous peoples to not only replenish their population, decimated by disease epidemics, but also to acquire furs and slaves to acquire European firearms and weapons to compete against their rivals. Ultimately, a destructive cycle of violence permeated in the shatter zone of the *Petit Nord* in the mid-eighteenth century.

³⁰⁸ Beauharnois, *Beauharnois to Maurepas (1742)*, 380.

³⁰⁹ Jacques Legardeur de Saint-Pierre, “Brief Report or Journal of the expedition of Jacques Legardeur de Saint-Pierre, Knight of The Royal and Military Order of Saint Louis, Captain of a Company of the detached *Troupes de la Marine* in Canada, assigned to search for the Western Sea (1752-1753),” in *Jacques Legardeur de Saint-Pierre: Officer, Gentleman, Entrepreneur*, ed. and trans. Joseph L. Peyser, 185-186.

³¹⁰ Delâge, *Bitter Feast*, 3-4.

Chapter IV

“Disobedient Children” in the *Petit Nord* and Northern Great Plains, 1742-1754

In the *pays d'en haut*, Indians had fought for their French Father against the English in the Seven Years' War. In 1761, following the cession of New France to King George III of England, British traders arrived ahead of the Redcoats at Michilimackinac. There, the Ojibwe chief Minweweh threatened the British trader Alexander Henry. Minweweh set the historical context for Henry, explaining that the “Ojibwe and the French king had made an alliance whereby the King became their father, and he promised to protect his children.”³¹¹ Minweweh threatened that once their French Father “awoke” he would drive the British out of Canada, and that “He will destroy you utterly!”³¹² The Ojibwe chief continued, and said that until the English monarch entered official negotiations with them through treaties and gifts, “we have no other father, nor friend among the white men than the King of France.”³¹³

In the eighteenth century, frequent disputes arose among traders, and inter-village violence frequently erupted throughout the *pays d'en haut*. Keith Widder argues, however, that “the importance of an ongoing trade usually prevented unsavoury incidents from escalating into war.”³¹⁴ Order in the *pays d'en haut* was always restored by the French governor, the Father of the alliance. Widder has argued: “When Indians became ‘disobedient children,’ Onontio confronted them with harsh words in order to re-establish peace. Once it had been restored,

³¹¹ Alexander Henry, “Travels and Adventures,” ed. Quaife, 15-38; Répertoire des engagements pour l'ouest conservés dans les Archives Judiciaires de Montréal (1670-1778), *RAPQ*, 1932-33. Quoted in Keith R. Widder, *Beyond Pontiac's Shadow*, 77.

³¹² *Ibid*, 77-78.

³¹³ *Ibid*, 78.

³¹⁴ Keith R. Widder, *Beyond Pontiac's Shadow: Michilimackinac and the Anglo-Indian War of 1763* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), xxviii.

Native people and the French resumed their normal lives.”³¹⁵ In the *Petit Nord* and the Great Plains, however, “disobedient children” were not disciplined or made obedient by Onontio’s “harsh words.” Some were only children in name and diplomatic rhetoric alone; Witgen has argued that beyond the *pays d’en haut* the “children of Onontio” was most likely regarded as purely one of the linguistic conventions of the French alliance.³¹⁶

In 1738-39, La Vérendrye had previously journeyed with his sons and trade associates to visit the Mandan villages on the banks of the Missouri River and two of its tributaries—the Heart and Knife Rivers. La Vérendrye had hoped to return to question the Mandans further about the “Western Sea” and to explore further inland over the Great Plains. The chaotic conditions of the shatter zone of the 1740s in the *Petit Nord* – epidemic diseases and endemic warfare – prevented La Vérendrye from making the journey himself. Therefore, La Vérendrye sent two of his sons to make the fifteen-month journey, where they perhaps journeyed as far west as the Big Horn Mountains in modern day Wyoming.³¹⁷

In 1742, the La Vérendrye brothers’ journey began at Fort La Reine on the Assiniboine River. There has been some debate on the identity of the two sons; the title of the Chevalier was given to the son appointed as the leader of the expedition. Most historians have accepted La Vérendrye’s youngest son Louis-Joseph as the Chevalier. There are numerous documents validating that the title of the Chevalier belonged to Louis-Joseph.³¹⁸ Following his formal education in Quebec, Louis-Joseph seems to have taken precedence over his remaining older brothers from the moment he arrived at the western posts.³¹⁹ Nellis Crouse has pondered if his

³¹⁵ Ibid, 10.

³¹⁶ Witgen, *An Infinity of Nations*, 305.

³¹⁷ G. Hubert Smith, *The Explorations of the La Vérendryes in the Northern Plains, 1738-43* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 104-106.

³¹⁸ Crouse, *La Vérendrye*, 214-215.

³¹⁹ Ibid,100.

elder brother François was a “rather colourless fellow, unable to assume leadership,” whereas Louis-Joseph was “endowed with more native ability,” and was certainly better educated.³²⁰

Journeying to the Missouri River and then onto the Great Plains, the La Vérendrye brothers passed through the hands and protection of many Indigenous peoples – the Mandan, the Beaux Hommes, the Gens des Chevaux, and finally the Gens de l’Arc. When the La Vérendrye brothers arrived at the village of the Gens de l’Arc, the Chevalier remarked, “Up to that point we had been very well received in all the villages we had passed through, but nothing in comparison with the gracious manners of the head chief of the Gens de l’Arc.”³²¹ The Chevalier seems to have learned the language to a sufficient degree to be “understood and also to understand what he said to me.”³²² Attached to the head chief of the Gens de l’Arc, the Chevalier and his brother were well taken care of and their belongings were carefully guarded. The La Vérendrye brothers were fortunate to find a friend in the chief of the Gens de l’Arc, who “did not know how to show us enough affection and friendship.”³²³

The chief warned the Chevalier not to be alarmed if he saw more villages assembling in the Gens de l’Arc’s camp everyday; word had been sent in every direction to assemble a formidable war party. The chief remarked to the Chevalier, “You are hearing war shouts every day; it is not without intention; we are going to march in the direction of the high mountains which are near the sea to find the Gens du Serpent. Do not be afraid to come with us, you have nothing to fear, and you will be able to see the sea that you are in search of.”³²⁴ The La

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ The Chevalier de la Vérendrye, “Journal of the Expedition of the Chevalier de la Vérendrye and one of his brothers to reach the Western Sea, addressed to M. the Marquis de Beauharnois (1742-43),” in *Journals and Letters*, ed. and trans. Lawrence J. Burpee, 414-415.

³²² Ibid, 415.

³²³ Ibid, 423.

³²⁴ Ibid, 415-416.

Vérendrye brothers reluctantly agreed to follow the Gens de l'Arc, in hope that they might finally lay their eyes upon the Western Sea.

On January 1 1743, the war party finally found itself within sight of the mountains for the first time; the number of warriors now exceeded 2,000. The Chevalier was less impressed by the Rocky Mountains, but was more taken aback by the impassioned warriors, “Every night songs and yells filled the air, and the men kept coming and weeping over our heads begging us to accompany them to the war. I always refused, saying that we wanted to create peace, not discord.”³²⁵ This rhetoric of neutrality, however, concerned and troubled the chief of the Gens de l'Arc who told the Chevalier that he was unsure “what all the tribes would think of our unwillingness to follow them; that he asked us as a favour... to accompany him as spectators only and begging us not to expose ourselves.”³²⁶ The Chevalier replied to the chief of the Gens de l'Arc, “who repeated it afterwards to the whole assembly,” that the French carried the calumet and not the hatchet, “the Great Chief of the French [Onontio] wished that all his children should be quiet and had ordered us to induce all the nations to live in peace, desiring to see the whole country tranquillized and peaceable.”³²⁷

The Chevalier was attempting to extend the *Pax Gallica* to the Indigenous peoples of the Great Plains, who had never heard of the great chief Onontio or even of his great rivals the Haudenosaunee and the English. On the Great Plains, Onontio's influence had little bearing on the nomadic peoples of the Plains As much as the Chevalier and his brother were loved by the chief of the Gens de l'Arc, he was their benefactor and protector. The Gens de l'Arc must have found it ridiculous that “the Great Chief of the French,” wished them, who he had absurdly

³²⁵ Ibid, 418.

³²⁶ Ibid, 418.

³²⁷ Ibid, 419-420.

designated as “his children,” should be “tranquillized and peaceable.”³²⁸ For their own part, the Gens de l’Arc, the Beaux Hommes, the Gens des Chevaux, or even the Mandan had showed no evident desire to join the French alliance under the French parameters of the *Pax Gallica*. They were, however, interested in befriending the French traders and explorers and incorporating them into their own native world.

The La Vérendrye brothers could not possibly hope to envelop all the nations of the Great Plains into a general French-mediated alliance. The Chevalier must have also realized the futility of Onontio’s wishes for all the Indigenous nations of the Great Plains to be quiet and peaceable children. This must have become especially evident when the French were attacked by the Gens du Serpent of in the shadows of the Rocky Mountains. The La Vérendrye brothers were alarmed when they “saw fifteen men approaching from the wood and covering themselves with their shields.” The Chevalier perceived that “they were preparing to attack us,” so he took action and “judged it well to let fly a few shots at them which caused them to retreat in a hurry, fire-arms enjoying a high respect among these tribes... [their] shields cannot protect them against bullets.”³²⁹ Therefore, the Chevalier and his brother unwillingly entered the French into the war against the Gens du Serpent beyond their established role as mere spectators, or even as mediators.

Military patterns on the Great Plains were markedly different from both the *pays d’en haut* and the *Petit Nord*. Historian Frank Raymond Secoy has identified two major patterns of warfare influenced by Europeans in the early eighteenth century – from the southwest, the post-horse pre-gun pattern of warfare; emanating from the northeast, the post-gun pre-horse pattern of

³²⁸ The Chevalier de la Vérendrye, *Journal of the Expedition of the Chevalier de la Vérendrye*, 419-420.

³²⁹ *Ibid*, 422.

warfare.³³⁰ The names of the Indigenous peoples that the La Vérendrye brothers encountered even attest to the post-horse pre-gun pattern of warfare on the Great Plains – Gens des Chevaux, Gens de l’Arc (horse people, bow people).

On the Great Plains, “the middle ground as a process existed, but not the middle ground as a space.”³³¹ Although the Chevalier de la Vérendrye was a “graduate of the school of the middle ground,” he failed to convince the Chief of the Gens de l’Arc of the benefits of a collective peace supervised by French mediation on the Great Plains. When the La Vérendrye brothers arrived in the village of the Gens des Chevaux, they found them “in great distress, nothing but tears and groans, all their villages having been destroyed by the Gens du Serpent and very few having escaped.”³³² The Chevalier wrote that the Gens du Serpent were considered very brave: “They do not content themselves in a campaign with destroying a village, according to the custom of all the savages; they keep up the war from spring to autumn. They are very numerous, and woe to those who cross their path!”³³³ The Gens des Chevaux reported to the La Vérendrye brothers that in 1741 that the Gens du Serpent “had entirely ruined seventeen villages, killed all the men and the old women, made slaves of the young women and sold them on the coast for horses and merchandise.”³³⁴

After having attached himself to the Chief of the Gens de l’Arc, the Chevalier learned even more about the trade relationship between the Spanish and the Gens du Serpent. The Chief of the Gens de l’Arc said: “The French [Spanish] who are on the coast are numerous; they have a large number of slaves whom they settle on their lands in each tribe; they have separate

³³⁰ Frank Raymond Secoy, *Changing Military Patterns on the Great Plains: 17th Century through Early 19th Century* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1953), 6-39.

³³¹ White, *Creative Misunderstandings and New Understandings*, 12.

³³² The Chevalier de la Vérendrye, *Journal of the Expedition of the Chevalier de la Vérendrye*, 412.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Ibid.

apartments; they marry them to one another and do not oppress them, so that they like being with them and do not seek to run away.”³³⁵ The Chief spoke “a few words of their language,” which the Chevalier recognized immediately as Spanish. The Spanish had commercialized the slave trade from their borderland settlements in North America. According to the shatter zone theory, through their superior access to horses, the Gens du Serpent had become a militaristic slaving society.

Shatter zone theorists argue that “As warfare became tied to commercial interests, the Mississippian chiefdoms’ mechanisms for mitigating war and brokering peace broke down, meaning that as Indian commercial interests intensified, so did the warfare and the militarization of those native groups who sought to control the trade.”³³⁶ On the peripheries of this Spanish world-system, conflicts and patterns of warfare were intensified. The Gens du Serpent’s destruction of seventeen villages in 1741 was an escalation of violence and captive taking because of the incentive for trade with their allies, the Spanish. The Chevalier remarked that the Gens du Serpent sold their war captives “on the coast for horses and merchandise.”³³⁷

The Gens du Serpent “killed all the men and the old women,” rather than marching them to the Spanish outposts to be sold into slavery. This was also consistent within the framework of a shatter zone. Ethridge notes, “After the raid captives not designated for adoption or exchange by their Indian slavers were kept in holding pens before being taken to the European port towns... all captives had to be capable of walking very long distances. This could help account for the killing of the very young and the very old – neither could make the journey and neither would fetch a good price in the slave markets.”³³⁸ The Gens du Serpent had become

³³⁵ Ibid, 416.

³³⁶ Ibid, 24.

³³⁷ The Chevalier de la Vérendrye, *Journal of the Expedition of the Chevalier de la Vérendrye*, 412.

³³⁸ Ethridge, *Shatter Zone*, 14.

commercially responsive to the Spanish borderland markets in the colonial Southwest.

Borderland historian James F. Brooks has argued that the “raid-and-trade networks” developed by the Spanish colonial borderland markets connected the Gens du Serpent and other raiders to the power nodes of mercantile capitalism.³³⁹

The Spanish borderland markets certainly affected the organization and warfare patterns of the Indigenous groups of the Great Plains. One of reactions to living in the shatter zone was coalescence, where two or more splinter groups would join together to form a new social formation that did not necessarily reflect pre-existing chiefdoms.³⁴⁰ In the early eighteenth century, Shoshonean-speaking natives coalesced into Plains societies by taking advantage of the presences of feral horse herds and abundant buffalo. Brooks has argues that these groups developed “an equestrian military culture.”³⁴¹ Similarly, DuVal has noted how Plains people acquired Spanish horses to dominate the Southern Plains. These Apaches and Shoshonean-speaking natives used their powerful position to raid more central and northern Plains people, and to sell their war captives to the Spanish in New Mexico.³⁴² The post-horse, pre-gun pattern of warfare that emerged in the Southern Plains gave the Gens du Serpent, and other Shoshonean-speaking natives, a distinct advantage over the more centralized Plains groups, who did not have exclusive access to horses, or European firearms. The Gens de l’ Arc, however, seem to have also been able to acquire some horses through feral herds. These changing military patterns, social formations, and borderland violence, certainly made an impression on the La Vérendrye brothers on the Great Plains.

³³⁹ James F. Brooks, *Captives & Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 33.

³⁴⁰ Ethridge, *Shatter Zone*, 38.

³⁴¹ Brooks, *Captives & Cousins*, 59.

³⁴² DuVal, *The Native Ground*, 109-110.

The La Vérendrye brothers learned that the Gens de l'Arc were the “only tribe sufficiently brave not to stand in dread of the Gens du Serpent.”³⁴³ The Gens de l'Arc themselves may have also sought to compete as raiders and traders in the borderland system of captive-taking and warfare. Befriending the La Vérendrye brothers would have potentially opened a European market to the Gens de l'Arc, who were only on friendly terms with only some of the peoples who traded with the Spanish; therefore giving them only a limited access to European markets. Moreover, Native Americans of the mid-continent also sought to have broad and interconnected networks of exchange.

Despite the Chevalier's attempts to define the parameters of the alliance on the Great Plains, the chief of the Gens de l'Arc would ultimately determine how the French were to be incorporated into their established patterns and structures of trade and alliance, of diplomacy and warfare. The Gens de l'Arc attempted to draw the French into their own local patterns of exchange, gender relations, diplomacy, and warfare on the native ground. Shifting military patterns caused by the introduction of horses and the commercialization of slavery affected the La Vérendrye brothers' exploration of the Great Plains. Perhaps the Gens de l'Arc were so eager draw the French into their own native world, and to embrace the Chevalier as a staunch ally, because they hoped to secure their own exclusive access to European markets.

In spring 1743, the La Vérendrye brothers resolved to part ways with the Gens de l'Arc and to return to Fort La Reine. The Chevalier wrote that he was “feeling sure that my father would be very anxious about us.”³⁴⁴ The same year also saw the resignation and withdrawal of the La Vérendrye family from the *Petit Nord*. What little diplomatic relations that the French had with the Indigenous peoples of the *Petit Nord* rapidly disintegrated in the wake of La

³⁴³ The Chevalier de la Vérendrye, Journal of the Expedition of the Chevalier de la Vérendrye, 413.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 354.

Vérendrye's departure. In the twilight years of the French empire in North America, the officers that followed La Vérendrye at the western posts would come to understand that Onontio was no longer welcome in the *Petit Nord*. Although the Cree, Assiniboine, and Monsoni had never agreed to become full-fledged children of Onontio under La Vérendrye tenure at the western posts, they had at least agreed to the term in a linguistic and diplomatic sense. They protected and provided for their French allies on the native ground, while not necessarily adhering to La Vérendrye's strict imperial policies. Following La Vérendrye's departure, however, the Indigenous peoples of the *Petit Nord* grew dissatisfied with their alliance with the French on the native ground.

Nicolas-Joseph de Noyelles de Fleurimont, La Vérendrye's nephew by marriage, succeeded him in 1744. La Vérendrye's sons retained their posts for the time being, and Louis-Joseph de la Vérendrye seems to have acted as commandant of the western posts until Noyelles's arrival in the *Petit Nord* the following year. Despite Noyelles's best efforts, the endemic violence and competition with English traders continued in the *Petit Nord*. Noyelles reported that "the Sauteux had accepted the hatchet from the English, and were preparing ambushes in Lake Superior to prevent any Frenchmen leaving next spring."³⁴⁵

Noyelles's successor, Jacques Legardeur de Saint-Pierre, received an even more hostile reception from Cree and Assiniboine bands than had La Vérendrye, or even Noyelles. Saint-Pierre encountered the same inter-village disputes and endemic warfare, which had plagued La Vérendrye's efforts to impose the strategy of *Pax Gallica*. Saint-Pierre wrote that the Cree and Assiniboine "were constantly waging [war] against the Sioux."³⁴⁶ Saint-Pierre blamed the English on Hudson Bay for the continuation of the inter-village wars, "the English whom they

³⁴⁵ Nicolas-Joseph de Noyelles de Fleurimont, "Journal of Occurrences in Canada; 1746, 1747," *DRCNY* 10: 130," Quoted in Keith R. Widder, *Beyond Pontiac's Shadow*, 30.

³⁴⁶ Jacques Legardeur de Saint-Pierre, *Brief Report or Journal (1752-1753)*, 180-181.

fear invite them <induce them> to make war upon the nations that do not do business with them.”³⁴⁷ In 1752-1753, the Cree and Assiniboine seem to have been shifting alliances away from the French posts and towards the HBC trade centres. Although the Cree and Assiniboine were “inclined to like the French, but they fear the English much more, and are even foolish enough to give credence to every dire thing they predict for them.”³⁴⁸ Saint-Pierre’s report concluded that “as long as these Indians have dealings with the English, there is no reason to delude ourselves that we will succeed in discovering the Western Sea.”³⁴⁹

French-Indigenous tensions at the western posts climaxed in winter 1752 when the small garrison at Fort La Reine on the Assiniboine River was attacked by an Assiniboine war party, numbering two hundred. On February 22, 1752, Saint-Pierre wrote that, “two hundred Assinibouels [Assiniboine] entered my fort [La Reine], all armed... an Assinibouel orator, who had not stopped delivering impassioned harangues to me, told my interpreter that, despite him, his nation wanted to kill and pillage me.”³⁵⁰ Acting quickly, Saint-Pierre “seized a flaming firebrand” and “broke open the door of the powder magazine... [and] knocked in a keg of powder.”³⁵¹ Saint-Pierre held the flaming firebrand over the gunpowder and shouted to the Assiniboines that he “would not perish at their hands, and that in dying I would have the honour of making all of them suffer my very fate.”³⁵² Following this courageous and suicidal demonstration, Saint-Pierre wrote that “These Indians saw my firebrand [and my smashed powder keg] rather than hearing my interpreter. They all flew to the fort’s gate.”³⁵³

³⁴⁷ Ibid, 185.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Ibid, 190.

³⁵⁰ Jacques Legardeur de Saint-Pierre, Brief Report or Journal (1752-1753), 186.

³⁵¹ Ibid, 186-187.

³⁵² Ibid, 187.

³⁵³ Ibid.

Saint-Pierre wrote that he spent the rest of the winter “undisturbed” at Fort La Reine. In early spring, some Assiniboines arrived to beg forgiveness for the actions of “their brothers” who had assailed the fort earlier in February 1752. Saint-Pierre wrote that he answered them:

I was not the one who was able to grant it [forgiveness] to them, that they had the General as a father, who had sent me to them, that I would report everything to him, and that he would see what to do... I would persuade their father to forgive them, being convinced of the sincerity of their repentance.³⁵⁴

In return, Saint-Pierre “entrusted” Fort La Reine to the Assiniboines, “who promised me to take very good care of it.”³⁵⁵ After resupplying at Grand Portage, Saint-Pierre returned to the Northern Great Plains in autumn and was “pained to learn from the Crees that four days after my departure from Fort la Reyne, the same Indians to whom I had entrusted it had set fire to it.”³⁵⁶

The following year, French-Indigenous relations continued to deteriorate at the western posts. Our sources for the events of 1754-55 at the western posts come from the journal of Anthony Henday, an HBC winterer, who likely encountered Louis de la Corne, Saint-Pierre’s successor, at Fort Paskoya on the Saskatchewan River. Departing York Factory in June 1754, Henday journeyed inland with a large group of natives in an attempt to induce various other Cree groups to come trade with the English at the HBC posts. On July 15 1754, Henday’s group came upon “4 Canoes of Indians in the French interest.”³⁵⁷ Henday wrote that the French Indians “came and smoaked with us, the Leader behaved very civilly to me; His name [is] Monkonsko.” Monkonsko warned Henday that they had entered the “inland Country and that I would soon see a French House.”³⁵⁸

³⁵⁴ Ibid.

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ Ibid, 187-188.

³⁵⁷ Anthony Henday, *A Year Inland: The Journal of a Hudson’s Bay Company Winterer*, ed. Barbara Belyea (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2000), 54.

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

On July 22, the group arrived at the “french factory” where two men came out and demanded to see Henday’s “Letter,” Henday replied that he “had no Letter, nor did not see any Reason for one, but that the Country belonged to us as much as them.”³⁵⁹ The Frenchman, possibly La Corne, “made ansuer [that] it did not, and that he would detain me there, and send me home to france.” Henday defiantly told him that he “knew france as well as he did, and was not afraid to go their more than then himself.” Henday remarked that this reply “Made Monsieure [La Corne] a Little Cooler.” La Corne was unable to apprehend Henday, not because of his witty retort, but probably because he was intimidated by the number of natives with whom Henday was travelling, and thus had allowed him to proceed. In a closing remark, Henday also described Fort Paskoya as a “Hogstye,” where all the Frenchmen were “very Lazey.”³⁶⁰

Near the end of July, Henday tried to persuade the Cree to return with him to York Factory to trade. The Cree were adamant that they were “more conveniently supplied from the french houses.” Although Henday argued that the English would give them better prices for their furs, he nevertheless “found them strongly attached to the french Interest.”³⁶¹ By winter 1755, however, Henday had persuaded a prominent “French Leader named Wappenessew” to accompany him to York Factory in the spring. Wappenessew “hath a great sway among the Natives & is much esteemed by the French.” According to Henday, this former “French Leader” Wappenessew brought “to York Fort 20 Canoes & is greatly esteemed by the Natives and Factors.”³⁶² Henday was able to persuade Wappenessew, revered and esteemed by the French, to bring his furs to the HBC posts rather than Fort Paskoya. Onontio’s influence had greatly diminished in the Northwest. In the twilight years of New France, the Indigenous peoples of the

³⁵⁹ Ibid, 57.

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ Ibid, 63.

³⁶² Ibid, 149.

Petit Nord and the Hudson Bay Lowlands abandoned their French Father, Onontio, in favour of the HBC traders.

Historian Victor P. Lytwyn contends that the French maintained the fur trade in the *Petit Nord* until the British conquest of New France.³⁶³ Lytwyn acknowledges, however, that some “trading posts in the west may have been abandoned as early as 1758 to provide support for the French colony” against the British in the Seven Years’ War.³⁶⁴ Certainly, the destruction of Fort La Reine and the increasing presence of English winterers in the interior would have generally discouraged the expansion of the French fur trade in the *Petit Nord* and Hudson Bay Lowlands in the last years of Onontio’s alliance in North America.

³⁶³ Victor P. Lytwyn, *The Fur Trade of the Little North: Indians, Pedlars, and Englishmen East of Lake Winnipeg, 1760-1821* (Winnipeg: Rupert’s Land Research Centre, 1986), 9.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

Conclusion

In 1743, La Vérendrye was forced to resign from his position and returned to Montreal. His finances were in ruin and he could no longer keep the western posts adequately supplied. Despite his failure, Pierre Gaultier de La Vérendrye has been commemorated in Canadian history as the “Pathfinder of the West.”³⁶⁵ La Vérendrye’s encounters with the Indigenous peoples of the *Petit Nord* did not spawn a positive “encounter between the two worlds,” as Denis Combet has suggested.³⁶⁶ Rather, La Vérendrye was an imperial agent who sought to draw the Cree, Monsoni, Assiniboine, Dakota, and other Indigenous groups of the *Petit Nord* and Northern Great Plains into Onontio’s family, as “brothers and children of the same Father [*frères et Enfants du même Père*].”³⁶⁷ Far from understanding and respecting Indigenous peoples, La Vérendrye was lost amongst an “Infinity of Nations,” whose real names he did not know, and whose motivations he scarcely understood. Despite his ignorance, La Vérendrye nevertheless attempted to subjugate these Indigenous peoples to the French Crown.

In the 1750s, Saint-Pierre and La Corne had probably not witnessed an Indigenous shift in alliances between the French and English. Rather, the Indigenous peoples of the *Petit Nord* continued to do what they had always done, operated in their own best interests on the native ground. The Cree, Assiniboine, Monsoni, and Dakota peoples of these regions did what was most expedient for their own interests and survival, and had repeatedly refused to be subjugated themselves to the authority of the French Crown; nor was French arbitration and mediation always in their best interest. The French would also be unable to implement the *Pax Gallica* on the Great Plains either. The commercialization of slavery and the introduction of horses from the

³⁶⁵ Lawrence J. Burpee, *Pathfinders of the Great Plains*, 1.

³⁶⁶ Combet, *In Search of the Western Sea: Selected Journals of La Vérendrye*, 165.

³⁶⁷ La Vérendrye, *Report in Journal form (1733-1734)*, 138.

Spanish borderland settlements intensified patterns of warfare on the Great Plains, which ultimately prevented further exploration by the La Vérendrye brothers.

In the *pays d'en haut*, however, Onontio's arbitration and mediation had united the refugees and dispersed peoples of the Great Lakes region against the Haudenosaunee.³⁶⁸ The French and their Aboriginal allies used violence and military strength to carry out a forceful peace treaty in the *pays d'en haut*, the *Pax Gallica*. The Wendat and their Algonquian-speaking allies of the *pays d'en haut* needed the “glue” of French mediation to hold their alliance together. Indeed, as DuVal's *Native Ground* argues, only Indigenous groups already weakened by disease epidemics and embattled by war *wanted* to create a middle ground with European newcomers.³⁶⁹

The strategy of *Pax Gallica* had failed in the *Petit Nord* because the historical conditions, which had shaped the French-Algonquin alliance of the *pays d'en haut*, had not shaped the political realities of the Dakota, Cree, and Assiniboine nations encountered by La Vérendrye and his successors. Unlike their counterparts in the *pays d'en haut*, the Indigenous peoples of the *Petit Nord* rejected Onontio as their Father; the Cree, Monsoni, and Assiniboine did not need Onontio in the role as a mediator and arbiter to protect them from Dakota aggression, nor did they need the *Pax Gallica* to dictate inter-village diplomacy in the *Petit Nord*. Nevertheless, the Cree and Assiniboine were perfectly happy to invoke the name of Onontio and rhetoric of the middle ground as long as it suited their purposes.

The Cree and Assiniboine did not reject the friendship of the French newcomers; rather they welcomed La Vérendrye and his *voyageurs* and agreed to incorporate them into pre-existing societal and cultural categories on the native ground. Andrew LaBounty has argued that Ojibwe women at Grand Portage became “sexually diplomatic” to secure fur trade alliances with French

³⁶⁸ Havard, *The Great Peace of Montreal of 1701*, 40.

³⁶⁹ DuVal, *The Native Ground*, 5.

newcomers through marriage.³⁷⁰ Paul C. Thistle, Sylvia Van Kirk, Gary Clayton Anderson, and Susan Sleeper-Smith have all argued that certain Indigenous peoples viewed marriage in a socio-economic context, which served to consolidate their economic relationship with French and English newcomers. Karlee Sapoznik has also suggested that La Vérendrye (or more likely one of his sons) would have taken an Aboriginal wife to secure these reciprocal social bonds to consolidate their economic alliances in the *Petit Nord*.³⁷¹ These “sexually diplomatic” marriages did not mean that the Cree and Assiniboine agreed to obey the French governor as their “Father,” nor did they adhere to the strategy of *Pax Gallica*. Rather, these marriages brought the French newcomers onto the native ground and into Aboriginal reciprocal socio-economic networks.

La Vérendrye’s eldest son Jean-Baptiste played a particularly prominent role in consolidating the reciprocal relationship with the Cree and Assiniboine. La Vérendrye wrote that his son had been “adopted as chief of the two nations.”³⁷² The Rainy Lake Monsoni and the Lake of the Woods Cree had both wished to carry Jean-Baptiste with them in their canoe, when he had accompanied them to war against the Dakota in spring 1734. Jean-Baptiste resolved the dispute by begging his newfound allies not be vexed, as they were “all marching together; your cabins are mine and we are all one.”³⁷³ Moreover, the Lake Winnipeg Cree and Assiniboine became attached to Jean-Baptiste when he established Fort Maurepas on the Red River in 1734. The Assiniboine said that they had first “adopted [Jean-Baptiste] as their chief from the time when he was building that fort [Maurepas] in their country.”³⁷⁴

Following the death of Jean-Baptiste in 1736, however, the friendships and kin-networks that the French had established amongst the Cree, Assiniboine, and Monsoni seem to have

³⁷⁰ LaBounty, *This Countries Ladies*, 38.

³⁷¹ Sapoznik, *La Vérendrye, Gender, Race and Slavery*, 27.

³⁷² La Vérendrye, *Report of the Sieur de la Vérendrye (1736-1737)*, 221.

³⁷³ *Ibid*, 181.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 222.

become strained. La Vérendrye's refusal to go to war to avenge the death of his son, who had become such a prominent figure and had been recognized as the chief among these Indigenous groups in the *Petit Nord*, diminished his reputation and might have compelled the Cree and Assiniboine to reconsider their relations with the French. The councils that La Vérendrye held at Fort St. Pierre (winter 1734), Fort St. Charles (spring 1734), Fort St. Maurepas (winter 1737) had initially prevented the Cree, Monsoni, and Assiniboine from going to war against the Dakota.

La Vérendrye's allies eventually grew weary and frustrated of the strategy of *Pax Gallica*, especially after their adopted chief and kinsman had been slain by the Dakota in the 1736 Lake of the Woods massacre. The unanswered death of Jean-Baptiste de la Vérendrye was an affront to Cree and Assiniboine honour in their culture of warfare. Finally, the Monsoni chief La Colle assured La Vérendrye that "it is no longer you who are taking any part in it [the war]; it is I and the chiefs of the three tribes."³⁷⁵ Therefore, La Vérendrye lost his grasp on the Cree, Monsoni, and Assiniboine as obedient children of Onontio, who would recognize the wider French mediated-alliance, where the Dakota were their brothers and equal children of the governor.

The smallpox epidemic of 1737 further strained the infrastructure of Cree and Monsoni societies. The devastation of the epidemic was amplified by the French newcomers in the *Petit Nord*. Paul Hackett has argued that the French and English forts and trading posts acted as "nodes of diffusion" for "disease redistribution."³⁷⁶ Shatter zone theorists Matthew H. Jennings and Robbie Ethridge have argued that some Indigenous peoples used violence as a regenerative force to accumulate war captives to restore their populations. In the shatter zone theory, friends and allies also grew closer; Indigenous groups coalesced as they were decimated by disease

³⁷⁵ Ibid, 232.

³⁷⁶ Hackett, *A Very Remarkable Sickness*, 43.

epidemics and warfare. The French strategy of *Pax Gallica* undermined the regenerative capacity of violence for some Indigenous peoples.

The commercialization of slavery was probably another motivator for increased patterns of warfare and the subsequent acquisition of war captives. La Vérendrye's acquisition of slaves also demonstrated how the Indigenous peoples of the *Petit Nord* and Northern Great Plains became commercially connected to the French empire's world-system. These commercial slave markets established by the French also prevented a reconciliation of a French-mediated alliance in the *Petit Nord*. La Vérendrye's active participation in the Indigenous slave trade also destroyed the Dakota's trust in the French, and further undermined the possibility of an alliance. Brett Rushforth has also argued that Indigenous peoples used the exchange of captives to shape alliances with French newcomers. The Cree and Assiniboine exchanged Dakota war captives with La Vérendrye to prevent French reconciliation with the Dakota, their enemies. Beauharnois had sent orders to Michilimackinac explicitly forbidding the trading of Dakota war captives. La Vérendrye seems to have disregarded these orders and continued to ship Dakota war captives to Michilimackinac, he even boasted in his 1744 report "of the slaves that are obtained for the country."³⁷⁷ In his 1742 report, Beauharnois complained to Versailles that there "will be more slaves than packages [of furs]."³⁷⁸ Ultimately, the presence of epidemic diseases and the commercialization of slavery created a shatter zone in the *Petit Nord*.

In the *Petit Nord*, La Vérendrye, the mouthpiece of Onontio, had desired that the Cree, Assiniboine, and Dakota all became the "brothers and children of the same Father [*frères et Enfants du même Père*]."³⁷⁹ In a twisted irony, the strategy of *Pax Gallica* was rejected, and pre-existing patterns of Indigenous warfare were amplified due to the European presence in the *Petit*

³⁷⁷ La Vérendrye, *Report of la Vérendrye (1744)*, 451-452.

³⁷⁸ Beauharnois, *Beauharnois to Maurepas (1742)*, 380-381.

³⁷⁹ La Vérendrye, *Report in Journal Form (1733-1734)*, 138.

Nord and Northern Great Plains. However, the *Pax Gallica* was a French conception of alliance and was meant to subjugate the natives to the will of their French Father, the governor Onontio. By rejecting the French-mediated peace and embracing violence as a societal regenerative force, the Cree, Monsoni, and Assiniboine acted on the native ground and did not compromise with La Vérendrye's desire for an overarching political reconciliation between all the Indigenous groups of the *Petit Nord* and Northern Great Plains.

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